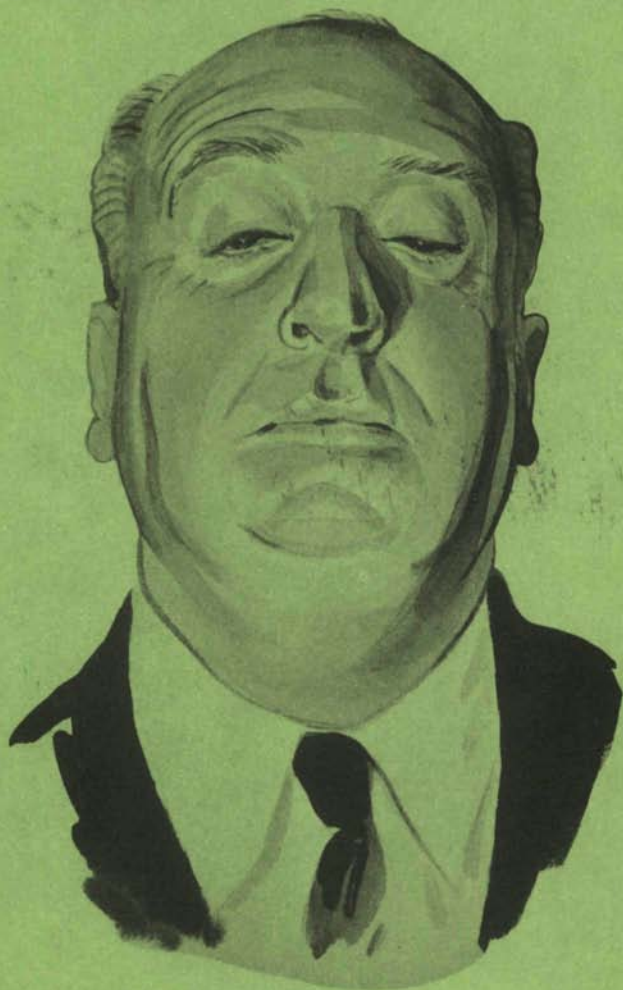


ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

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August 1968

Dear Reader:

This is the time of year when the only chills you are likely to enjoy emanate from these pages. I should add, however, that my efforts to induce such quaking are not limited by any thoughtful consideration, such as season.

We are in the midst of vacation time, that much is clear. I cannot say that such free time is dictated by the gentle sex in all walks of life, but I did hear of a recent example where a lucky fellow gained three weeks of additional unrestricted breathing when a hired killer was forced to take his family to the seashore.

There was another case, it seems to me, where a police officer collared a mad bomber in a book bindery. By then the bomb expert had hidden his charge, and the officer's vacation had begun. The sleuth was off, with no time to spare looking for a minute explosive.

I trust you do not hear a tick-tick-tick as you read on. If you should, however, you may use the coupon on either Page 114 or Page 160 for a relative. But please make haste.

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Time teaches many lessons, but oftentimes a liberal amount of it is required to teach just one.

Lesson One

By
**James
Holding**



WHEN the call came in from the Raccoon Hill patrolman about a car, I had a hunch it might tie in with the Merchants Bank robbery. It was the same make and model for which we were looking.

I took a breath. "Sounds like it might fit," I said, then asked the big question. "What license number?"

"Sorry," he answered. "No li-

cense plates on it, but your broadcast several days ago made me wonder . . ."

"You wondered right. What's your name? I'll put it in my report."

"Royce," he said. "And thanks."

I jotted down the name. "Where'd you find it?"

"In a ditch, lying on its side in thick sumac bushes that almost hid it from the road. I happened to see a flash of sunlight on glass down there as I drove past, so I got out to take a look."

"Whereabouts is this ditch?"

"Route 91, about halfway between Raccoon Hill and Elverton. You know the road?"

"Sure," I said. Raccoon Hill and Elverton are two of Anderson City's better suburbs. I felt excitement beginning to build inside me. This was the first sign of a possible break we'd had on the Merchants Bank job. "I'll get right out there, Royce. Will you wait?"

"I'll wait," Royce said, "but snap it up, will you? I'm off duty in half an hour."

"Right." I reached for my hat



and stood up. At the next desk my partner, Max Fleming, was frowning at his typewriter, tapping on it with three fingers. "Come on, Max," I said. "Let's go."

Automatically he buttoned his collar and tightened the knot of his new necktie. Also automatically he went into his usual beef. "If I'd known about this paperwork," he said, "I'd have stuck to Traffic. For sixty-nine hundred and thirty bucks a year we've got to be typists, too." He put on his hat and started after me toward the squadroom door. "Let's go where?"

Max and I had gone through high school together, joined the police force together, and only a month ago, been assigned together to the Detective Division. I said, "That call was from a Raccoon Hill cop who's located a black two-door in a ditch. With no license plates."

"Oh, baby! It could be the break, couldn't it? Where is it, Johnny?"

I told him as we ran down the scarred steps to the police garage and signed out a car. I got behind the wheel and Max jumped in beside me, settling his chunky body firmly in his seat, resting his muscular hands, clenched into fists, on his knees.

As I wheeled into the street and touched the siren out of sheer high spirits, Max said, "Better late than never, Johnny. Cross your fingers." "They're crossed," I said.

I thought about the robbery five days before. The squeal had come in at half past twelve from the bank. A lone gunman, in the middle of the noon rush hour, had stuck up one of the tellers, forced her at gunpoint to fill his paper sack with all the currency in her cash drawers, walked out again with \$24,035, and lost himself immediately in the lunchtime sidewalk crowds.

Lieutenant Randall had barked at me from the doorway of his little private office, "Take it, Johnny, it's all yours. You and Max."

"Max went home sick yesterday," I said.

"Then take Ryan," he said, and closed his door.

Ryan and I were at the Merchants Bank inside five minutes. I was a tiger, of course. It was my first major assignment as a plainclothes detective, and I wanted to look good. Bank robberies were old stuff to Ryan. He let me do the work.

I interviewed the teller first. Mrs. Hardy, a middle-aged woman with dyed blonde hair and scared eyes, said, "We were very busy at the time. There were long

lines of customers in front of all the windows. This fellow was the last in my line. I was still putting away a cash deposit made by the customer before him when he slid this note through the window to me, and rested a big revolver on the edge of my counter. The gun was hidden from everybody else by his body. But I could see it plain enough!"

I nodded and read the note. It was printed in pencil, big crooked-running words, on the back of one of the bank's own deposit slips. STICKUP, it said. FILL THIS BAG WITH CASH. KEEP QUIET IF YOU WANT TO STAY ALIVE.

"What could I do?" Mrs. Hardy said, still trembling. "I gave him the money."

"You were smart," I soothed her. "Now, what did this man look like, Mrs. Hardy?"

"Short and heavy-set," she answered at once. Her memory of him was recent and strong. "Powerful-looking. Brown eyes, I think." She paused. "No, I'm not sure about the eyes. But he had a beard."

"Beard," I said, writing in my book. "What color?"

"Dark brown. And bushy. Bushy eyebrows, too."

"Probably false," Ryan piped up.

"Did you get the impression

they were false, Mrs. Hardy?" I asked.

"The only impression I got," she said flatly, "was that I was going to have a hole in my stomach if I didn't hand over my money in a hurry. That kind of prevented me from getting any other impressions." She was a little sarcastic. I didn't blame her.

"Short, chunky, brown beard and bushy eyebrows, probably brown eyes. That's it so far, Mrs. Hardy. How about his clothes?"

"He had on a dark hat, I think, with a turned down brim—a narrow brim. And a gray sweater. That's all I can remember."

"You've done great," I said, and started to put away my book.

She got a faraway look in her eyes. "It's funny," she said then, "but now that I think about it, he looked a little familiar to me, like he reminded me of someone."

Ryan murmured in my ear, "Happens all the time. They think they recognize the guy; usually some poor innocent jerk they'd like to see in trouble."

I paid no attention. I wrote "faintly familiar" in my book and thanked Mrs. Hardy.

We went to look for the bank guard who doubled as doorman at the bank's front entrance, through which the gunman had evidently entered and fled.

"Yeah, I noticed him," the guard said. "Guy with a beatnik beard, dirty face, and a paper sack, like groceries."

"Twenty-four grand's worth of groceries," Ryan said.

"Yeah. How about that?"

I interrupted their gossip. "Which way did he go?"

"I didn't notice. He was just another customer to me. He'd mixed with the crowd and disappeared before I knew anything was wrong. Pretty slick, if you ask me."

"We didn't," I said. He was no help.

The newsboy at the stand on the corner did better. He told me that one of the cars obliquely parked against the curb in a two-hour zone on the side street adjoining the bank had backed out, turned south, and gone off about fifteen minutes ago. The driver had been hurrying to the car.

"Was he carrying a paper sack?" I asked. "Short stocky guy with a beard?"

"I think he had a beard, yes," the newsboy said.

"Probably false," Ryan muttered.

"I didn't see any paper sack, though," the kid went on. "I was selling papers, Dad." He was a little sarcastic, too. Funny the way everybody gets sarcastic with us. "Anyway, that's the only car that

left this parking line in the past fifteen minutes. I'm sure of that. And this is the only parking place around the bank. Of course, there's a parking garage *under* the bank."

"That's out," I said. "Where was this car that backed out and left?"

"Right there." He pointed to a parking slot forty feet away, now filled by a gray sedan. "It was a black two-door, new model. I notice cars more'n people."

"You sure do," I said thankfully. "Do you notice license numbers, too?"

"Naw," the kid said. "Who needs them? We got enough numbers to remember, like telephone and Social Security, without worrying about other people's license numbers!"

"The plates were probably false, anyway," Ryan muttered.

"Was it a state license or out of state?" I asked the kid.

"State."

I thanked the newsboy, bought one of his papers, and let him keep the change from a quarter. Ryan thought I was nuts. As the kid handed me the paper, he said with a wise grin, "The last number on the license plate was seven, Dad. That's all I noticed. Would that help?"

"It might," I said. "Thanks again."

Ryan and I had the dope on the bushy-bearded gunman and the black sedan with a license number ending in "7" on the air within twenty minutes of the time the guy left his parking slot by the newsstand. I said to Ryan, "False beard or not, we ought to get some kind of action."

We didn't. Nothing came in on either the guy or the car all afternoon. That was funny, because even if we couldn't grab the gunman, we should have heard something on the car—a report from some citizen that his car had been stolen, or a set of license plates was missing, or a report from one of our own cruisers that the car had been found abandoned. Or all three, for most heist jobs follow a pattern: the guy steals a car, uses it for a quick getaway from the immediate neighborhood of the heist, then abandons it just as quick as he can in case it's been identified, which it usually is. Sometimes he steals license plates off somebody else's car to falsify the identity of his own car during the heist and getaway.

Maybe our bank robber was a fearless citizen using his own car and his own license plates on the Merchants Bank job? I didn't think so. Neither did Ryan. Even with a false beard, nobody would take a chance like that unless he

was a laughing academy graduate.

Nothing happened for five days, except Max got over his flu and came back to work. I briefed him on the robbery and he took over from Ryan as my partner on the case—if you could call it a case by that time. We set the wheels in motion to check out individually all cars of the newsboy's description in the state whose license numbers ended in "7". Since there were quite a few, it was slow work and we were pretty sure it wouldn't get us anywhere.

That's why we were excited when the call came in from Raccoon Hill.

The place on Route 91 where the car was in the ditch wasn't more than four miles out of town. Using the siren, Max and I got there in a hurry. The Raccoon Hill man, Royce, waved us down where he had parked his cruiser. "In there," he said to me, pointing at some sumac bushes along the road. "All right if I go now?"

"Sure," I said. "And thanks." He got in his car and took off in the direction of Raccoon Hill.

The car was black, all right, a new two-door, as naked of license plates as a jaybird, and only a little bit banged up by its run through the sumacs and its gentle crash into the ditch. I say *gentle* crash because it was obviously

deliberate. We could trace the route through the bushes where the driver had purposely run the car off the road at slow speed.

Max and I looked it over, inside and out, with proper regard for any possible fingerprints it might contain. It told us nothing. There were no papers, not even a road map, in the glove compartment or anywhere else. The manufacturer's number and motor number had been defaced and were illegible. We searched the terrain around it in case the driver had stashed his license plates nearby after removing them. We didn't find them.

"We'll get it towed in," I said to Max. "Maybe the lab boys can find something."

We were pretty disappointed. On our way back to headquarters in Anderson City, I said, "Listen, Max, if the car was stolen from somebody, or its license plates were, we'd have had it reported by now. Right? And if it wasn't the guy's own car, which is unlikely, where'd he get it?"

Max thought about that. "Borrowed it from a friend?"

I grinned. "Fine way to treat a friend's new car—use it in a bank holdup; ditch it out of sight; take off its license plates and gimmick its numbers, even the mileage numbers on the odometer. All the same, I think you're right. It

was borrowed just for the job."

"So the big question is," Max said, "who from?"

"I'd say the bank robber doesn't want us to know who from. At least, he's gone to a lot of trouble to keep us from finding out."

"So all it means," Max said with disappointment, "is we still got to find out who owns the car."

"That's right." I avoided a deep pothole in Route 91 with a twist of my wrist. I wasn't driving so fast going back to town. "Who could you borrow a new car from who wouldn't miss it for a week or so, Max?"

Max thought some more, or pretended to. "From somebody who was going to get a cut of the loot," he suggested with a laugh.

"In that case, why not use fake license plates for the robbery, and after it was over, just take them off and return the car to his pal? Why hide the car, and destroy its identification?"

"I'll bite, Johnny. Why?"

"Just to cause *delay* maybe. To give himself a few days' grace to skip with the dough. So where *else* could you borrow a car and keep it for a week without a word being said?"

Max shrugged. "His mother. His girlfriend. A soldier who's just gone overseas. Anybody. There's a million possibilities."

"Long shots," I said. "But there's one that isn't. A natural."

He got it then. "A rental car!" he said, beaming. "Sure! It's worth a try, anyway."

So we put that one out to our end of the state as soon as we got back to headquarters. We wanted a leasing outfit which had rented such a car with a license number ending in "7" within the past week, and hadn't had the car turned in yet.

We drew a blank in our own city, but next morning we had the word we wanted from Samson, a small town thirty miles away. A place called Johnson's—combination service station, garage and car-rental—had a car out that matched our description.

Max and I didn't try to do it over the phone. We drove to Samson ourselves, we were that eager. We got there just before noon.

Johnson's was a service station with nine pumps, a big garage behind the concrete service area, and a couple of cars parked at one side with signs in their windshields stating, "Car rentals, \$30 a week and 8¢ a mile".

We pulled in beside one of the banks of three pumps. The man who came to wait on us quickened his step when he saw the red police bubble on top of our car. He was short and thickset and had a

beard—a bushy one, brown—and his face was dirty.

Max sucked in his breath and nearly caved in my ribs with a nudge. "Well, well," he said. He kind of eased out of the car and stood beside it, ready for action.

I said to the guy with the beard, "We don't need any gas. Are you Johnson?"

"Johnson's dead," he said. "Mrs. Johnson's back there in her office, if that's who you want."

"That's who I want," I said, hiding my surprise.

I was thinking fast. Boy, oh, boy, was the way my mind went, this could be bingo. He could fake a contract for one of Mrs. Johnson's rental cars easy! He could use the car himself to stick up our bank thirty miles away. He could laugh his head off at us dumb cops running around in circles trying to catch up with him, even if we *ever* found the car and figured out where it came from. I thought from the expression on Max's face that the same ideas were going through his head.

I climbed out from under the wheel.

Max said, "We do need some gas, Johnny, and a quart of oil. I'll stay out here with the car while you see Mrs. Johnson." What he meant, of course, was that he'd stay outside and keep an eye on

this bank robber. Not a bad idea.

"Okay. Where's the office?"

The bearded greasemonkey gestured and said, "In the garage."

I went in. A corner of the garage was partitioned off and a motherly-looking gray-haired woman in slacks and a leather jacket was sitting at a little desk in there. I took off my hat and introduced myself, showing her my badge. I didn't sit down because there wasn't any place to sit except her chair. I said, "Mrs. Johnson, we got a report you have a black two-door out on rental with a license number that ends in '7'."

"That's right," she said, smiling and showing small, even, white teeth. "The complete number is J135X47. I hope nothing serious has happened. We're insured, of course." She got that in fast.

"We think your car was used in a bank holdup in Anderson City last Friday." I told her about it.

"How awful!" she said, with a lift of her leather-clad bosom.

I bored in. "And what's more, Mrs. Johnson, the bank robber's description fits your bearded service station attendant out there to a T!"

She bristled like I'd called her a dirty name. "Tony?" she said. "Tony? He's been my right hand man for six years! Ever since my

husband died, Tony's kept this business going for me almost single-handed! You can't think for a minute . . ."

"It seems likely that your car was used in the robbery, Mrs. Johnson," I cut in, "and if so, don't you think it's a funny coincidence that the robber looked just like your Tony?"

"It's funny, all right," she said with utter contempt. "Hilarious!"



Now *she* was being sarcastic. "Your robber has a beard so you decide it was Tony! Haven't you noticed how many men are wearing beards these days?" She was sore. She half stood up from her beat-up desk chair. "When did you say this silly robbery took place in Anderson City?"

"Friday of last week, at twenty-three minutes past noon." I had a sinking feeling.

"There, you see?" She sat back in her chair. She wasn't sore any-

more. "It couldn't have been Tony. He was right here working all day Friday."

"All day?" I asked without much hope.

"All day. At the time of your robbery, Tony was sitting out there in front with Herb, my mechanic, and Joe and Lefty, my other two service boys, eating lunch beside the grease rack!"

I said, "Are Herb, Joe and Lefty here this morning?"

Energetically, she stuck her head out the door and bellowed into the garage. "Herb! Get Joe and Lefty and come in here, will you?"

I knew I was licked. Mrs. Johnson, even to a new detective like me, wasn't the type to fake an alibi. Neither were Joe and Herb and Lefty, who solidly confirmed Tony's presence thirty miles away from Merchants Bank in Anderson City at the time of our robbery.

When they went out, I said to Mrs. Johnson, "I apologize. Will you let me see your record on the rented car?"

"Sure," she said, all small-toothed smiles now. She fumbled it out of an old filing cabinet behind her desk. "I rented the car myself, Thursday night—to a man from Anderson City, as it happens." She looked at me with a

satisfied little glint in her eye.

She held out the papers to me. The guy who'd taken the rental from her at 8:25 the preceding Thursday evening turned out to be a man named J. A. Smith. Wouldn't you know? Smith! His address was given as 22 Brighton Drive, Anderson City. I wrote it in my book, although I was pretty sure it was a phony. "What did the guy look like, Mrs. Johnson? Remember?"

"No beard," she said, showing that glint again. "Short, compact, kind of strong-looking. Like my Tony without his beard, you might say. In a dark suit. He wore a ring on one hand, I think, the one he signed the contract with. That's all I remember about him."

"What credentials did he offer you? Any proof of identity?"

"You think I'd rent him a car without any? He had a driver's license, oil company charge cards, and a wallet identification card."

"All in the name of J. A. Smith?"

She nodded.

"Would you recognize this Mr. Smith if you saw him again?"

She gave me a last touch of the needle. "With or without his beard?" Then she smiled. "Yes, I'd know him again."

"Thanks for your help, Mrs. Johnson."

"Glad to help, although I realize I didn't have to answer your questions," she said. "You're out of your jurisdiction here, buddy, didn't you know that?"

Pretty sharp. I'd forgotten all about it. Anyway, I told her I'd be in touch about her car—if it *was* her car—and went outside.

Bearded Tony was servicing a car with an out-of-state plate. Lefty was wiping the windshield of another. Max was standing beside the cola machine watching them both. His eyes asked me questions.

I shook my head at him, got into our car, and motioned him to get in, too. When we pulled away I said, "The bearded guy was a false alarm, Max. Solid alibi."

"I had hopes."

"Me, too. But I got a name on the rental job—Smith. From Anderson City."

"Well, well, one of the Anderson City Smiths," he said. Sarcasm even from him. "That's nice. Any particular one?"

"J. A. Smith, 22 Brighton Drive."

Max perked up. "Brighton Drive? That's pretty fancy territory, Johnny. Mostly two and three-car families along there." He slumped again. "So why should Mr. Smith be renting a car in Samson?"

"To rob a bank with," I said. "Don't be stupid," I was fed up. "But we'll check it out."

When we stopped for a quick lunch, Max drew my attention to a dark blue medium-priced car in the parking lot. "I'm taking delivery on one of those babies this weekend," he said with pride. "Not bad, eh?"

"Who left you the bundle? That thing runs into money."

"No more than a wife," he said, and snickered. "I'm single, remember?"

I let it go. About all Jane and I can manage is a secondhand compact.

The restaurant had an Anderson City telephone directory, so without expecting anything we looked up J. A. Smith and there he was, at 22 Brighton Drive, just like my little black book said.

I called the number while Max breathed down the back of my neck. A maid answered, and said Mr. Smith was at the office. I said where's the office and she said who wants to know. After a few sincere words from me about being an old friend passing through town with only an hour to spare, she told me where I could reach Mr. Smith—at the Merchants Bank in Anderson City.

Max heard it, too. He was sputtering when I hung up. We didn't

waste time kicking the news around there. We got rolling for Anderson City.

The maid wasn't kidding. Jerome A. Smith was one of the Merchants Bank's twenty-two vice presidents. He wasn't one of the common herd that sat behind a carved railing in the banking room, either. His office was on the second floor, with his name on the door and everything.

Max and I went in without knocking. There was a very nice dish sitting at a secretarial desk in front of another door. She was dark and dignified, and when she got up to ask our business we could see she was stacked.

Max took over right away. He always does with the young stuff. I was all right to handle Mrs. Johnson in Samson, but Max was the boy to operate on Mr. J. A. Smith's secretary in Anderson City—in his opinion.

He tried for a quick impression and got it. "We're the police, miss," he said sternly. "We'd like to talk with Mr. J. A. Smith."

Her eyes got big. She looked at Max with them for a second. "I'll tell him," she said, and opened the heavy door behind her desk. We followed her right in; not polite, but permissible.

Mr. Smith was sitting at a desk about as big as a tennis court in

an office with four windows and green wall to wall carpeting. He looked up and asked, "What is it Miss Harris?"

She started to reply, but Max got in first. "We're police officers," he said. "Can you spare us a minute, Mr. Smith?"

Smith frowned at Miss Harris. His eyes got small instead of big. He probably thought we were going to ask him to buy a ticket to the Policemen's Ball. He nodded to Miss Harris and she went out closing the heavy door behind her with just the suggestion of a slam.

With her gone, Max let me take over again. I took a little different tack this time, and hit Smith with the important question right away. "Mr. Smith," I said politely, "can you tell us where you were between twelve and one o'clock last Friday afternoon?"

He gulped and ran a hand through his hair. Then he did a slow burn. His face got red. He stood up behind his desk. Mrs. Johnson had described him pretty well. He was short, compact and strong-looking, wearing a ring on the hand he'd lifted to his hair. He had brown eyes, too. When I squinted a little and imagined him with bushy beard and eyebrows, a gray sweater, a dirty face and a narrow-brimmed hat, I could see very plainly how he must have

appeared to poor Mrs. Hardy, the teller downstairs, when he held a gun on her and demanded her money last Friday. No wonder she'd thought he looked faintly familiar! An officer of her own bank!

"What kind of nonsense is this?" Smith barked. "What do you think you're doing, barging into my private office and asking me loaded questions like that?"

I backed up fast. After all, he was a big shot banker and probably swung some weight down at City Hall. I said as apologetically as I could, "Sorry to be abrupt, Mr. Smith. We're in a hurry to check out a couple of things in connection with the robbery of this bank last Friday. We assumed you'd cooperate, being an officer of the bank."

"By confessing to the crime?"

"It would help us if you'd answer my question, Mr. Smith. After that, I'll tell you why I'm asking it."

"Sit down," Smith said. His temper subsided, obviously choked off by amusement, and he started to grin. "Are we on television? We must be, with all this corn."

Max and I sat in easy chairs near his desk. He sat down again, too. I stuck to my guns. "Joking aside, Mr. Smith, where *were* you last Friday between twelve and

one?" I asked peremptorily.

He laughed. "Some luncheon or other, I expect; I attended four last week. Let's see . . . Friday . . . that was Rotary, I think."

"You aren't sure?"

He gave me a long look. "Yes, I'm sure. But you aren't, and that's what counts." He leaned forward and tripped a toggle switch on the intercom box on his desk. "Miss Harris," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Smith?" Her voice, slightly tinny, came back.

"You have my engagement pad out there?"

"Of course. Do you want it?"

"No," he said into the box. "Leave it on top of your desk and put the telephone book beside it. Then go to the ladies' room or take a coffee break or something for fifteen minutes, will you?"

"Certainly, Mr. Smith." She sounded puzzled. "Your date pad and the telephone book."

"Now," said Smith, grinning at me, "go out and check my date pad for yourself. Last Friday, Rotary luncheon. You'll find it there. Nothing up my sleeve. Not even a secretary in the same office to overhear the telephone calls you're going to make."

I had that licked feeling again. "We'll take your word for it, Mr. Smith. No need to—"

He cut in. "Oh, yes, there *is*

need. If you even suspect that I had something to do with robbing my own bank, I demand that you satisfy yourselves thoroughly of my innocence." He scribbled on his desk pad and tore off the top



sheet. "After you check my date pad, I insist you telephone these three men. They're fellow Rotarians and they attended Friday's luncheon. Get them to confirm my presence there for the full hour." He read the names. "Dr. Thorsten—he sat at my right at the table—call his office number. Professor Wall was on my left—call the University for him. And Mr. Cummins of Temple Aluminum was directly across from me. Do you think you can trust the word of those three? I can give you others, if not."

"Sure," I said weakly. Everybody in Anderson City knew those three. If they were crooked,

so was I—and I knew I wasn't.

"I'll do it," Max offered. He stood up. His face showed he was just as upset as I was at the way things had turned out. "Tell Mr. Smith how we got into this, will you, Johnny?"

I nodded and Max went out. The door between Smith's office and the secretary's thudded shut behind him.

I gave Smith a rundown on the black car, the Johnson car-rental bit, and the use of his name and identification to rent the car—which we were certain was the getaway car for our bank robber.

He listened, tapping his blunt fingers on the desk. He wasn't mad any more, just interested. When I wound up, he said, "Now I get it. I guess it's lucky I *was* at a Rotary lunch and can prove it, hey?"

I said, "Did you mislay your driver's license and charge cards last week, Mr. Smith? Or were they stolen from you?"

Smith said, "I don't know."

"How about looking?"

To my surprise, he didn't drag out his wallet. He grabbed his telephone instead, and dialed an inside number, only three digits. He said, "Harry? This is Mr. Smith in the bank. Will you see if there's a wallet in the glove compartment of my car down

there? And if there is, see if my driver's license and charge cards are in it, will you? Thanks. I'll hold on." He put a palm over the phone. "The garage under the bank," he explained to me, "where I park my car every day."

"You keep your license and charge cards in your car?"

"Sure. Why not? That's where I always am when I need them, isn't it?" He made it sound reasonable.

"Don't you even lock the glove compartment?"

"Not so far," he grinned, "but I will from now on."

In two minutes, Harry came back on the phone and reported to Mr. Smith that his wallet was in the car, but it was empty. I could hear him because Smith held the receiver out halfway between us. "Thanks, Harry," Smith said, "I guess I've been robbed," and hung up.

"That's it, then," I said and stood up. "You'd better report the loss of your operator's license and your charge cards, Mr. Smith. Sorry we bothered you."

He stood up, too. "Forget it." He shook hands with me. "I'm sure if anyone can lay our bank robber by the heels, you can. Good-bye."

Well, that took the sting out a little, unless he was needling me,

which he probably was. Touché!

I went out the way I'd come in, through the secretary's office. Max was just finishing the third telephone call out there. I said, "I suppose he's alibied?"

"A hundred percent, Johnny. No sweat. Those Rotarians I called were pretty curious, though, what it was all about."

"Let's get out of here."

"Shouldn't we wait till Miss Harris comes back, so we can thank her for the use of her phone?" Max had that look in his eye.

"Not unless she can lend us a computer programmed to solve bank robberies," I said. "Come on."

We didn't say another word till we were back in our car. We'd parked in the same two-hour zone the bank robber had used on Friday. We still had ten minutes on the meter, so we just sat there. To be honest, I didn't know what to do or where to go next, except back to headquarters.

"They *were* Smith's identification cards," I told Max. "Our bank robber lifted them out of Smith's wallet sometime before last Friday."

"That figures," Max said. "The dope. Any guy who's dumb enough to keep his cards in the glove compartment of his car—

and not even locked up—deserves to have them stolen.”

I nodded.

“What’s our next move, Johnny?”

“I don’t know. As far as I can see, we’re fresh out of suspects, Max.” Right then is when it hit me. I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand straight up. I had a hard time keeping my eyes on the passing traffic. “We’re fresh out of suspects,” I repeated, slow and heavy as everything clicked into place in my head, “except for one.”

“We’ve got one left?” There was a comical note of surprise in Max’s voice.

“Uh-huh. Just one. He just this minute occurred to me. And he fits into what we know pretty good. Listen: he’s short, thickset, strong-looking, has brown eyes. Has no alibi for the time of the robbery or the time when the car was rented. He’s always griping about not earning enough dough, so it makes sense that he might have decided to get some the easy way. Besides that, in the past week, he’s suddenly blossomed out in fancy clothes. He starts spending money like it was going out of style. He’s plenty smart enough to leave all the red herrings lying around that we’ve run into on this case. And he could get himself a

false beard and a dirty face as easy as the next guy. How’s he sound, Max?”

“Like a prime candidate, I’d say. Who is he, Johnny?”

I turned around in the car seat, facing him. “You,” I said.

He laughed. “Cut it out. I thought you were serious.”

“I am serious.”

“Wait a minute, now. A gag’s a gag, Johnny, but—”

“No gag, Max. I mean it. Where were you between noon and one o’clock Friday?”

“I was sick in bed with a temperature of 101 degrees.”

“Can you prove it?”

“What goes, Johnny? Of course. Doc Blackburn came to see me and . . .”

“When?”

“Eight-thirty Friday morning. He’ll swear I was sick, on a stack of Gideons!”

I said, “You played a whole football game once with a temperature of 101 when we were in high school, Max. Is there anybody else beside Doc Blackburn who can swear you were too sick to leave your bed last Friday? Or who can alibi you for Thursday night when Mrs. Johnson rented the black car to you in J. A. Smith’s name?”

“No, damn it!” Max yelled. “And nobody who will swear you’re out of your skull, either!

But you are! Just because I've griped about our pay a few times when we . . ."

I didn't let him finish. "And then suddenly made a down payment on a car you can't afford? And started wearing seven dollar Italian silk neckties just this week, when you've never owned a tie in your life worth more than a dollar and a half? How about those?"

Max looked as if he were going to cry or explode. "Look," he said, trying to keep calm and reasonable, and touching the heavy silk necktie he was wearing, "I got a brother Phil, remember? You knew him. He's in New York now, trying to be a writer. He writes detective stories, and he just sold his first story to a mystery magazine. So I helped him a little bit with the police procedure in his story and he sends me a couple of fancy neckties to show he appreciates it. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," I said, "if it's true."

"It's true. And I told you about the new car. I've been saving up a long time to buy it."

"So forget that. Why wouldn't you go inside with me to see Mrs. Johnson today when we were in Samson?"

"You know why! Because I stayed outside to keep an eye on the guy we thought had stuck up the bank. The beard-o."

I sneered. "You knew he wasn't the bank robber. No, I'll tell you why you stayed outside. You didn't want Mrs. Johnson to recognize you as the guy she rented the black car to last Thursday night! That's why."

Max pounded his big fist on his knee. "Drive me to Samson," he yelled, "and we'll see who Mrs. Johnson recognizes!"

"Plenty of time for that," I said. "We'll get to it, don't worry. Right now, let's get back to headquarters and lay it on the line for Lieutenant Randall, shall we?"

"Listen," Max said. He wasn't calling me Johnny any more, I noticed. "Wait a minute. You want to be the laughingstock of the Division? That Mrs. Hardy, the teller, didn't you tell me the bank robber looked familiar to her? Didn't you? Even when he was wearing a beard? That lets me out. I don't know Mrs. Hardy from Adam's off ox. Never saw her in my life. And she doesn't know me."

"Are you sure?" I got a little sarcastic myself now. "Before you switched to Detective from Traffic, didn't you direct traffic on the bank intersection for two years? Mrs. Hardy probably saw you every day."

He groaned and gave me a frantic look.

I twisted the knife a little. "Besides, you knew darn well if you stole identity cards from an executive-type car in the bank's garage, whatever big shot owned them would probably have an alibi for the robbery time. That would be the end of the trail for us, if we ever got that far."

I leaned over and switched on the ignition. Max had run out of words. He stuck out a hand, appealing to me. It was a big muscular hand—the hand that had aimed a Police Special at poor Mrs. Hardy's stomach over her teller's counter last Friday. It even had a lodge ring on the third finger.

I said, "That's just the icing on the cake, all that stuff, Max. It's some kind of evidence, I suppose, but it's flimsy. What really put me onto you was what you said just now about Smith's cards."

"What'd I say?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you? You said any guy who'd keep his cards in his glove compartment deserved to lose them."

"What's that got to do with it?"

I let him have it then. "How'd you know Smith kept his cards in his car? When Smith told me that, you were telephoning those Rotarians in Miss Harris' office, with a soundproof door between us. And I didn't mention it since; only that Smith's cards were stolen. So how

could you know where he kept them . . . unless you were the guy who stole them?"

The stunned look on his face told me I had him there.

Thus endeth the first lesson, as the preachers say; the first lesson a new detective should learn, namely: no matter what the evidence seems to point to, don't jump to conclusions.

For Max Fleming didn't rob the Merchants Bank, of course.

A fellow named Carl Wetzel was picked up the next day over in Carolton on the state line. When apprehended, he was wearing a false beard and false eyebrows and running out of the Carolton Citizens Bank with a brown paper sack containing \$12,000. The only reason he was apprehended was because he had the bad luck to bump into a passing cop. In the collision Wetzel's paper bag broke open, scattering currency and a 38-caliber revolver all over the sidewalk, which the cop thought was a little odd.

Wetzel made it to his getaway car, parked nearby, before the cop managed to collar him. The car turned out to be a rental job leased in another town under the name of some guy whose identity cards had been stolen out of his car the day before. It was our bank rob-

bery all over again, right down to the false beard.

Well, after the Carolton cops had politely got Wetzel a competent lawyer as we have to do these days; told him he didn't need to talk or answer questions if he didn't exactly feel like it; and just to be on the safe side had got written permission from the Supreme Court of the United States to regard Wetzel as a possible suspect in the bank robbery since he had been caught in the act, they leaned on him a little and he cheerfully confessed to the whole thing.

He was proud of it, in fact. He bragged a little. He said the Carolton cops were lucky to catch him because he'd robbed the Merchants Bank in Anderson City last Friday in exactly the same way, and got away scot-free. He said he'd been a short order cook in a diner near the Merchants Bank for six years, and worked out his bank-robbing technique while cooking up hamburgers for the diner's customers, many of whom were employees of the very bank he intended to rob—including Mrs. Hardy, the

teller. She'd never seen him in whiskers before, or without his high white chef's cap, but she'd seen him.

So had Mrs. Johnson, it developed. She picked him out of a line-up without a moment's hesitation as the man to whom she'd rented the black two-door.

Max and I were both glad when Wetzel was caught. It melted some of the ice that had formed between us.

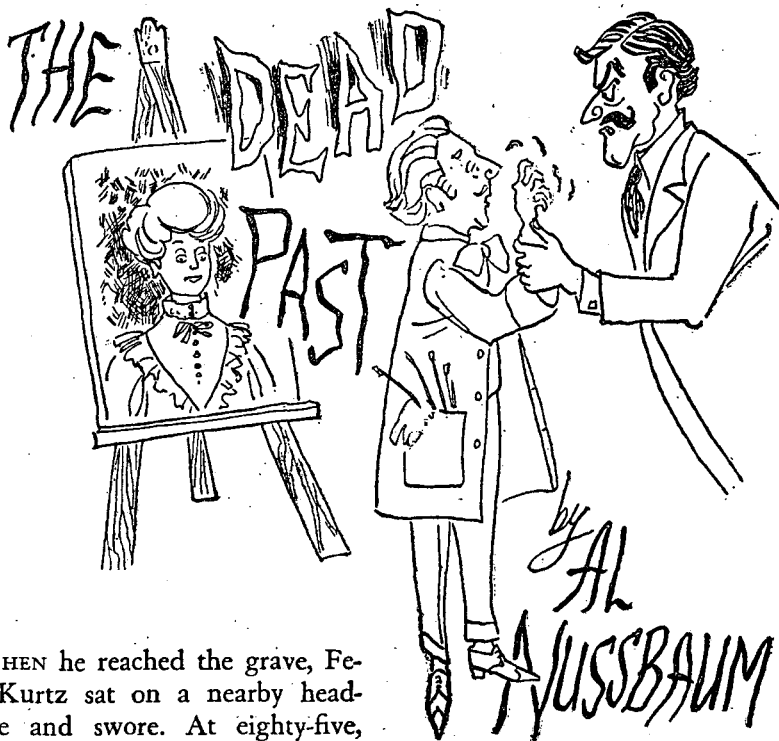
But *everything* had pointed to Max, wouldn't you say? Especially the fact that he knew about Smith's identity cards being swiped from his car's glove compartment when there was absolutely no honest way Max could have found that out?

How was I supposed to know that Smith forgot to switch off his intercom after he told Miss Harris to go to the ladies' room, and that every word Smith and I said in his office came through the box loud and clear to Max in the other room?

Anyway, Max and I are still partners, and the ice is almost gone.



With no memory to resurrect the past, the silence of the void is deafening.



WHEN he reached the grave, Felix Kurtz sat on a nearby headstone and swore. At eighty-five, age hadn't diminished his ability to unleash a torrent of imaginative profanity; but the cursing did nothing to steady his shaky legs, or remedy his lack of breath, and these were the cause of his anger. Only his own weaknesses could anger him more than the failings

of others. His was an active and impatient mind, trapped in a body unable to meet its demands, and he didn't like reminders of the fact.

Fifty years, half a century had passed since the funeral. He hadn't

set foot inside the cemetery in all that time, but he'd had no difficulty finding the weed-covered grave with its weather-stained tombstone. When a life has been made up of one huge success followed by another and another, every failure is memorable. He'd always associated Kurtzville, the company town founded by his grandfather, with that early failure, rather than the huge profits the sale of coal had brought during the two world wars. Because of this, he'd been happy when reduced profits forced him to close the mines in the late 40's and move his business headquarters to Pittsburgh. Now, Kurtzville was the Pennsylvania equivalent of the western ghost towns, and he'd returned to take away one of its citizens.

Of course, he could have delegated the job of supervising the reburial to one of the many vice-presidents of his numerous corporations. Or he could have taken no action at all. The state would have moved the grave along with all the others in the path of the new highway. The illogic of his being there neither escaped him nor troubled him. It had been a long time since he had believed himself to be a rational being. He knew that emotions of one kind or another had always governed his actions and reactions. It was only later, after a

decision had been made or a deed had been done, that he had devised reasons for them. In this case, he had no reasons; he simply wanted to be present.

A flat-bed truck, equipped with a winch and boom, turned at the rusted cemetery gates and bumped along the gravel trail toward Kurtz. As it passed the black limousine where Kurtz's driver was waiting, the man quickly raised his window to keep out the dust and flying stones. It stopped near the grave.

Three workmen climbed down from the cab. While two of them busied themselves removing picks and shovels from a chest behind the cab, the third approached Kurtz. "Mr. Kurtz?" he said. "Which grave is it?"

Kurtz pointed to the grave as the other man approached and they dropped their tools at its foot with a clatter.

The first man squatted beside the headstone and ran his fingers over the dates. "After all this time, there ain't gonna be much left," he said.

"Yes, there will," Kurtz contradicted. "The coffin was cast iron from the foundry in town. It took six strong men to carry it."

"Anyhow, this is gonna take a while, mister. If ya wanta wait in your car, I'll call ya when we're

ready to use the winch to lift it."

"Don't take all day—I'm paying you people by the hour, you know," Kurtz said, and turned toward the limousine . . .

From the window of his office overlooking the main entrance to the mine property, Felix Kurtz saw Myron Shay adjust his cravat with nervous fingers as he stated his business to a company policeman. Explanations were unnecessary. Everyone in the company town knew about the artist who had arrived during the excitement of the last cave-in to make drawings for a Washington, D.C. newspaper. They knew too that Kurtz had hired him away from the newspaper on the pretext of having him paint a portrait of his sister Emily, thereby cunningly avoiding publicity which might have resulted in legislation to force expensive safety measures in the mines.

Minutes later a clerk, holding his green eyeshade deferentially at his side, came to say that Myron Shay was downstairs. Kurtz told him to send Shay up. He was pleased by the good fortune, whatever its cause, that had brought Shay to him when he was about to send for him.

Myron Shay was approximately twenty-five, ten years younger than Felix Kurtz, and they differed

greatly. Kurtz was tall, powerfully built, and favored dark suits, suitable for trips down into the mines. Shay was slightly built, given to wearing light browns and blues and the bright yellow, ivory-buttoned spats of a dandy. Kurtz combed his black mane straight back and had a large moustache whose ends were stiffly waxed, while Shay's blond hair was parted neatly in the middle, and his pink face appeared to have no need of a razor.

"I thought you were an accomplished artist," Kurtz said, seizing the initiative. "I thought you said you worked effectively in all mediums."

Shay stood in front of Kurtz's mahogany desk and shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Yes, sir—clay, stone, oils, charcoal—"

"Is it your normal practice to spend over a month on one small likeness?"

"Well, sir, I—"

"No matter, no matter." Kurtz waved him to silence with a gesture of impatience. "I do not propose to pay for your services unless they are completed satisfactorily by Friday of this week." The newspaper artist no longer represented an immediate threat to him, but Kurtz wanted him away before something happened to alter the situation.

"Oh, I wouldn't think of charging you, sir," Myron Shay said.

Kurtz frowned. "What do you mean?"

Shay moved his hands nervously, as a man will who is forced to speak when he is used to expressing himself in other ways. "Your sister and I—Emily and I are in love. We wish to marry. I—I've come to ask your blessing."

Kurtz laughed humorlessly, then stood and came around the desk. "You want to marry my sister?"

"Yes, sir. I love her and—"

"Love her? Do you think you're the first man who's pretended an interest in her simply because she's my sister? Well, let me be the first to inform you she is underage and has no funds of her own. And just because I hired you to paint her portrait, don't think I'm unaware of how plain she is."

"Sir! Emily is *not* unattractive, and she's a very warm and sensitive human being."

"Enough of this foolishness! My sister is not going to be tied to any second-rate opportunist. I suppose you think I'll offer you money to stay away from Emily. If you do, you're mistaken. I own this town and everything in it. Nothing happens here without my knowledge and consent."

Kurtz reached out swiftly and

grasped one of the artist's wrists in each huge hand. "You're threatening something of mine, so I'll do the same for you." He raised his arms until Shay's long, tapered fingers dangled limply in front of his face. "You have fifteen minutes to return to the loft you're using for a studio, pack your equipment into your automobile, and take the road out of town. If you fail to leave, I'll have these fingers smashed into sausage meat."

To emphasize his last two words, Kurtz spun the younger man around and pushed him from the room, pausing only long enough to throw open the door. White-faced, Shay walked past the whispering clerks and left the mine offices without looking back.

Kurtz motioned to a clerk and said: "Telephone Miss Kurtz. Tell her to come down here right away."

The man returned in a few minutes. "She isn't at home, Mr. Kurtz. The maid said she went to sit for her portrait."

Kurtz snatched his hat from the rack and left his office, slapping the hat against his right thigh like a riding crop. "I'll be back later," he called over his shoulder, and descended the steps two at a time. He paused at the main gate to order two company policemen to come with him, then signaled for

his sedan. Kurtz climbed into the front seat with the driver, and the two company policemen sat in the rear.

When they reached the street where the artist's studio was located, Shay and Emily were pulling away from the curb in an open car. Shay looked back once, then his vehicle picked up speed.

"Catch them! Cut them off!" Kurtz shouted at his driver.

The man pushed the accelerator to the floor, but the large sedan was unable to gain on the smaller automobile. The two vehicles sped along the cobblestone street, and Kurtz pounded the dashboard with his fists. "Stop them!" he shouted. "Stop them!"

The reports of two closely spaced pistol shots crashed above the roar of the racing engines. Kurtz turned in amazement to find one of his policemen leaning from the window of the sedan with his weapon in his hand. Ahead of them, the smaller car swerved once, then slowed and stopped.

Kurtz's driver skidded to a halt behind it, and all four men rushed forward. They found Myron Shay cradling Emily in his arms, while a red stain on her dress grew rapidly larger.

Later, at the company hospital, Dr. Moreau came out of the pri-

vate room and closed the door quietly behind him, his frown almost hidden on a face already deeply etched by time. Both Kurtz and Shay took steps toward him, but he fixed his bloodshot eyes on the younger man and spoke to him, ignoring Kurtz. They exchanged a few words of rapid French, then the elderly doctor patted Shay on the shoulder and Shay went to the door of the sickroom.

Kurtz moved to follow, but the doctor stepped in front of him. "How did it happen?" he asked in English.

Kurtz licked his lips. "An accident . . . a sad misunderstanding. Emily was running away with that—that artist! I was trying to overtake them, and one of my policemen thought a crime had been committed."

"I suppose it was young Shay who was going to have the accident—like the other young men you had beaten after they showed an interest in your sister," the doctor said dryly.

The shock was wearing off, and Kurtz didn't like underlings to talk back to him. "Look, you old drunk, don't preach to me. I hired you when no one else would." He didn't mention that he paid the doctor far less than he would have had to pay someone else. "You have only two jobs in this town—

taking care of the sick and seeing to it that the dead are buried. Confine yourself to your duties as doctor-mortician, nothing else."

"Yes, sir," the doctor said meekly, but his narrowed eyes glistened.

"Fine. We understand each other. Now, how come you and Shay seem so friendly? Is he a foreigner, too?"

"He studied in Paris and speaks French," Moreau explained. "We met when he arrived here and found we have interests in common."

Kurtz stared at the doctor's red-veined nose. "Mutual interests? Like what—whiskey and gin?"

"Chess and conversation," the doctor said. "The French language is well suited to talk of art and literature."

Kurtz waved a finger imperiously under Moreau's nose. "How suited is your English to talk of medicine? What's my sister's condition? How soon can she leave here?"

"The bullet passed through the seat before striking her. It didn't penetrate very deeply, and no vital organ seems to have been damaged, but she lost a great deal of blood," the doctor said. "I wouldn't recommend moving her for at least a week. She must have complete rest—no excitement. Then, if there are no complications..."

He held one hand out with the palm up in a noncommittal yet pointed gesture.

Kurtz paused. "All right, doctor, but I advise you to stay sober."

The doctor drew himself up stiffly. "I never drink when I have a patient."

"See that you don't," Kurtz said.

The following days were unhappy ones for Felix Kurtz. It was obvious that the news of Emily's accident had spread. Everyone knew he had suffered his first failure—the artist hadn't been frightened away. Whenever Kurtz turned quickly, he caught people smiling at him, and groups of miners fell silent whenever he appeared. Kurtz had known that his employees hated him, but he was mildly surprised to find that his sister's misfortune was a source of amusement because of the embarrassment it caused him.

Kurtz didn't like being laughed at, but for the moment he was helpless to do anything about it. Emily was too sick to leave the hospital, and Myron Shay had virtually moved into the hospital to be near her. Kurtz was forced to postpone his efforts to break up the romance until the girl was stronger. Then he'd see how long he remained an object of ridicule. In the meantime, the looks of fear he got from the young couple during

his daily visits made it possible for him to endure his humiliation. Both he and they knew their days together were numbered.

And then the unexpected happened. Ten days after the accident, Kurtz was called to the hospital. He was met by a stone-faced Dr. Moreau, who informed him Emily had died during the night. Kurtz raised the sheet and looked at the still form for a moment; then, completely without a sign of emotion, he ordered Dr. Moreau to make the funeral arrangements.

Myron Shay left town without attending the funeral; thereby proving Kurtz had been correct about him all along . . .

"Mr. Kurtz! Mr. Kurtz!" It was the chauffeur's voice, and Kurtz awoke to find him shaking his arm. "They're ready to lift the coffin."

"Don't shout, you fool. I was merely resting my eyes." He climbed stiffly from the car and joined the workmen at the open grave.

The truck was beside the hole and heavy chains had been fastened to the rusty coffin in preparation for hoisting it to the bed of the truck. Two men were set to operate the winch and boom while the other was in position to guide the coffin.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Get on with it. Time is money, you know. And be careful—that's heavy."

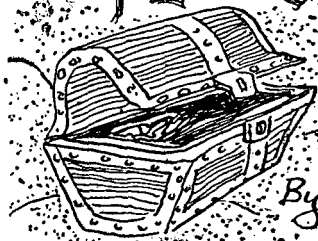
"Not as heavy as it was," the foreman said. "There's so much rust in the grave, there can't be more than a thin shell left."

The man waved his hand and the winch began to turn, taking up the slack in the chain. Then the dull red of the iron coffin rose into the open and swayed gently from the boom while the foreman steadied it with one outstretched arm. Suddenly, the edge of the grave collapsed under the weight of one of the truck's rear wheels. As the wheel dropped, causing the truck to tilt, the coffin swung away, smashed into a nearby headstone, then crashed to the ground.

The men on the truck bed hung onto the winch and stared open-mouthed at the coffin. Kurtz went to it and looked down. A two-foot section of the lid had shattered, revealing the reclining figure of a young woman, wearing the high-necked, long-sleeved fashion of half a century before. One of her ears had been damaged by a piece of the cover, and he touched it with trembling fingers. The wax ear, like all of the dummy's other delicate features, had been formed with loving care by the sensitive hands of an artist.

An ambitious bee has been known to bury itself in its own juice.

A SECRET LONELY PLACE



By

Robert Colby

TWELVE DAYS before Barney Ruckner was to be strapped into the electric chair for the murder of the two guards during the mail truck robbery, Julie, his wife, got a late-night phone call from Neal Tracy. Neal had been one of the four men

involved in the million-plus robbery. He had also been Julie's secret lover.

Julie always got a piece of the money-pie because she was driver for the group and she earned it. Besides, Barney insisted, and he was the boss. Neal and Julie had planned to vanish together with their shares of the loot, but before the take could be divided Barney Ruckner had been caught, tried and convicted. The gun which killed the guards was found in his pocket when he was captured.

Barney never would admit that he had help, nor would he tell where he had hidden the money, which by agreement he had been

holding for a cooling period until it could be spent without accusing the spenders.

The call from Neal Tracy to Julie Ruckner was dangerous. The police knew that Barney had not been alone in the robbery and they

guessed that Julie had some part in it, even if she were only an accessory. They would be watching Julie, for she was the only link to the others. They might even be tapping her phone.

"I've got to see you," said Neal, and she recognized his voice at once.

"I'm listening—but there may be some birds on the line."

Neal said, "Oh? Well, remember that time when Barney was out of town? Remember the place and the arrangement?"

"I remember."

"Go there now. I'll be waiting."

"What if someone—"

"If you don't show in an hour I'll know why. See you, baby."

Julie dressed in a hurry. She was afraid but also excited. It had been months since she had seen Neal or had any contact with him at all. They were a careful group, organized, patient. There had been other robberies, widely separated, flawless. This was the first disaster.

It was mid-winter, with a light frosting of snow on the streets. Outside the small suburban house, Julie peered into the darkness, her eyes searching up and down the block. Satisfied, she went to the garage and backed her car onto the street. The tires spun, then caught, and she drove off slowly into the

night, watching her rearview mirror.

She never did spot the car behind. It followed well back, traveling without lights.

At the hotel a prepaid room had been reserved for her under her code name of Margaret Hamilton. She registered, got the key and took the elevator to the eighteenth floor. She entered the room, removed hat, coat and gloves, lit a cigarette. She was moving toward a connecting door to the adjoining room when it sprang open and Neal Tracy stepped in.

"Heard you," he said with a happy grin. They embraced, clung to each other for nearly a minute before he asked if she had been followed.

She snorted. "Would I be here now if—"

"Yes, if you had a tail and gave him the slip."

"No," she said, "I simply wasn't followed at all. There was a stake-out at the house for a while but they gave up and called it off. I haven't seen any cops about for a couple of weeks."

Neal went into the other room and returned with a tray containing liquor, ice and glasses. He was darkhaired, slender and young. His pale, rather delicate features seemed perpetually smug. "You hear anything from Goetz or

Whalen?" he asked. Del Goetz and Mike Whalen were the other two members of the quintet.

Julie shook her head. "Not a word. They must be still running scared. But Barney heard from them before the trial, when he was in the county jail."

"Yeah? How?"

"Through his brother."

"Brick? I thought he was still in the pen."

"No, he's out on parole." She took the glass from Neal's hand and drank.

"Brick is a creep, a psycho," Neal said. "Once he wanted in with us but Barney wouldn't have him, his own brother. So what was the message he carried? As if I couldn't guess."

"Naturally, he was supposed to ask Barney what he did with the loot. Barney told him he was going to take that secret with him to the grave unless he could buy something with it."

"Like what?"

"Like murder two instead of murder one."

Neal said, "But the D.A. wouldn't trade, obviously."

"No. It's an election year and the heat's on to make this case a big deal, an example of good old-fashioned eye-for-an-eye justice. So after Barney was sentenced to die he offered the money for a commuta-

tion. That didn't work either. Now he's on death row and since he has no family left but me and Brick, we're the only ones allowed to see him. Not counting the lawyer, of course."

Julie stood, paced to a window. She was small and neat and tawny-haired, with sharp little features and a sensual mouth.

Neal wanted to know how long it had been since she had visited with Barney.

"Day before yesterday," she answered with a sly smile.

"He mentioned the loot?"

She nodded. "He said he's paying for it with his life and it belongs to him, all of it. And what belongs to him, he says, belongs to me."

"He told you where to find it!" Neal cried.

"No, but he'll get word to me after—after the execution. When he's dead, his lawyer will have something for me."

"What, for pete's sake!"

"Something that will lead to the money, of course. Barney isn't dumb. He wouldn't trust even his lawyer. So it'll be a clue, one that I'll understand."

"Clues be damned," Neal sneered. "Is this a game? Why doesn't he just tell you where to find the dough?"

"Because Barney says his lawyer



is going to try to bargain with the money up to the last minute."

"Nuts!" said Neal. "That shyster knows it's too late. He's just hoping to get his own dirty paws on the cash."

"Besides," Julie continued, "Bar-

ney also says our conversations could be bugged at the prison."

Neal shrugged. "Just as long as you get the money, I don't care how. But you'll have to be mighty careful. I can't come out of hiding to help you and you're only one

little girl against—how many? Del Goetz, Mike Whalen, the cops—and maybe the shyster too. We'll have to work out a plan, a fool-proof scheme to lose the whole tribe."

"And when I've got the money, where will I find you?" she asked.

"I'll be waiting in Mexico City," he replied. "Later I'll tell you the address and you can memorize it. But until we meet in Mexico, you're on your own. We can't afford the risk of keeping in touch."

"Then this is our only night together for a long time," she said woefully, crossing to him.

"That's right, baby," he said, holding her lightly, thoughtfully. "Listen, you wouldn't run out on me once you have the whole bundle, would you?"

"Why should I do that, honey? There are only two things I want out of this life—plenty of money, and you."

"That's my girl!" he said. "We'll get married in Mexico, then we'll travel around the world. No more stickups, never a day's work. Just one big ball to the end of the line."

"You don't have to sell me, honey," Julie told him. "I've been with you all the way, and now I can hardly wait. So let's make plans."

Shortly before two p.m. on the

day following the execution of Barney Ruckner, his lawyer appeared at the house of the brave little widow. Always well-mannered and gracious, she served him coffee and cake. Then, with an expectant little smile, she sat waiting for the moment of truth.

The lawyer produced a sealed white envelope and handed it to her. Julie stared curiously at the envelope, upon which her name had been typed, then placed it casually on the table beside her.

"Aren't you going to open it?" the lawyer asked blandly. He sat deep in his chair, eyes so narrowed that he gave the impression of a man about to fall asleep.

"I think not just now," said Julie with a faintly mocking smile. "It might contain some last message, you know. Maybe a kind of personal farewell."

"Perhaps," said the lawyer evenly, "but I rather doubt it. Despite his deep feeling for you, Mrs. Ruckner, Barney never did seem a person who was capable of expressing much sentiment."

"Oh, come off it!" Julie said abruptly. "Why don't you just admit that you know perfectly well what's in this envelope?"

"Well," said the lawyer with a grin, "under the circumstances, I could hardly avoid knowing, could I?"

"Hardly," she answered sullenly. "On the other hand, I also confess that knowing what Barney left you, I still haven't the vaguest idea what it means."

"Maybe it will mean nothing to me, either," she said impatiently. "In any case, if you don't mind, I'd like to be alone now."

"Barney owed me a great deal," the lawyer declared.

"For what!" she snapped. "His execution?"

"Listen, I tried, Mrs. Ruckner. I did everything I could."

"Thanks," Julie said dryly. "And you were well paid for trying, I'm told. So if you want some further reward, you'll have to find it where Barney is finding his."

The lawyer stood. "I don't blame you for feeling bitter," he said soothingly. "I only meant to help. Remember, you're just a woman and you're alone now. If Barney left you a kind of map to his treasure, then he's put you on a dangerous road. You can almost hear the hoods cocking their guns, the cops racing their motors. You'll need all the advice and protection you can get."

"That's true," she agreed. "What would it cost me—fifty percent?"

He smiled. "I'm prepared to be generous. How about a third?"

"I'll call you," she lied. "Just as soon as I see if Barney left me

anything that's worth discussing."

The very second the lawyer had gone, Julie dived for the envelope and furiously tore it open. It contained nothing but a scrap of paper and a key. Upon the paper was scrawled a crude little poem:

A secret, lonely place I leave to
you

No other soul will have a clue

Below this place a tiny square

Beside a giant circle, bare

Open padlock, down on knees
and dare to hope

Then slowly pull a vanishing
rope

Julie was puzzled. The poem was a dirty joke. It told her nothing, absolutely nothing! Squeezing the thick brass key in the angry clutch of her fist, she read the lines again and again. After awhile she grew calmer. Barney was educated, Barney was clever. In some ways he had been pure genius. He would not leave her anything beyond her ability to decipher. It was only that she was too frantic, too eager.

Coolly thoughtful now, she took the poem apart line by line, analyzing each separate word, searching for double meanings. Soon her imagination caught a thread which she followed dimly into the past until the first two lines of the poem became clear. Then a door in her memory opened wide, and

all the other pieces fell neatly into place. It was so absurdly simple, she wondered how it had escaped her for a moment.

Yet, in five years she had not been to this secret place and, as if he had forgotten that it existed, Barney had not mentioned it at all.

Julie ripped the paper into fragments and set them afire in an ashtray. At that moment the phone rang. It was the lawyer wanting to know if she had come up with the answer.

"I think I've got the first part of it," she stalled, "but the rest makes no sense to me. I'll keep trying. Can I call you back?"

"I've got a copy," he said, "and if I don't hear from you *very* soon, I'll play ball with the other team. You understand?"

"Oh, perfectly," she answered, and hung up. Let him turn a hundred copies over to the police. Unless they could read with her eyes, a blank page would tell them as much.

Quickly she packed a suitcase and dressed in her warmest clothing. She was rushing toward a connecting interior door to the garage when the phone rang again.

"Julie?"

"Yes."

"You dig who this is?"

It was Mike Whalen! She reached for a gimmick. "It's about

time," she said. "I've been waiting for you to call."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, and be careful what you say. This could be the biggest party-line since those crank-up phones went out."

"You know what we want, don't you, Julie?"

She snickered. "I could make a rough guess."

"Yeah, and we hear you've got it, Julie. There's a rumor Barney drew up a will and put you in charge of distribution."

"I'd like to talk to you about that," she lied. "Remember that bar where we used to meet? Dark little place with booths in the back."

"Sure. We'll be there. In half an hour."

"Better make it at least an hour. Unless you want company, I might have to drop a few people on the way."

After a space he said, "Okay, but don't cross, sweetheart. Otherwise, you'll get a one-way ticket. At the other end you'll be meeting Barney."

Click! The line was empty. "Good-bye, boys," she whispered. "Forever." Scared and excited in nearly equal parts, she put down the phone and picked up the suitcase. She made a dash for the garage, tossed the case to the floor

in back of the car and hoisted the garage door.

She had traveled only a few blocks when she observed a small, dark sedan keeping distant company behind. Without haste, she made a few experimental turns. The sedan kept pace.

She braked in front of a drug-store and hurried inside. Standing back from the glass of the display window, she watched the tail pull into the curb. Two men sat smoking and chatting in apparent idleness. She had not seen them before but her well developed sixth sense told her they were cops.

She was about to turn away when a two-tone, blue-cream convertible parked not far behind the detective types. The car seemed familiar, the driver was. Del Goetz! And what nerve, right in back of the cops! Mike Whalen would be waiting at the bar but Goetz had been hovering near her house to make sure she didn't give them the slip.

Julie had been in tighter spots. Telling herself not to panic, she crossed to a phone booth, looked up a number and dialed. It was a charter plane service and in accordance with the plan she had worked out with Neal Tracy, she had prepared the outfit for her call. She got the same pilot on the wire and told him it was Margaret

Hamilton. Repeating her destination, she asked how soon he could be ready to take off. They agreed upon half an hour, though she warned him she might be delayed.

She bought a newspaper and glancing at the headlines she casually returned to her car and casually drove away. Soon enough, the others followed. In a sick way, it was a funny kind of game—cops and robbers on the same hunt.

She made her next stop at a supermarket. Easing toward the rear of the store, she began to pile items into a cart. She was primed to escape out the back way, leaving her car and suitcase to the police as a fair enough exchange, then take a taxi to the airport, but now she saw that one of the two men from the sedan had entered the store and was watching her. She got a better idea. She paid for the groceries and carried them to her car. She stood for a moment looking about. The man had returned to the parked sedan, and meanwhile, Goetz had parked his convertible in a space about fifty yards removed. Julie climbed in and pulled abreast of the probable cops.

"I'm glad you boys are keeping tabs on me because I'm in trouble," she said.

"That so," replied the driver noncommittally. "What sort of trouble, Miss?"

"The man sitting there in that convertible has been following me." She extended her arm and pointed a finger directly at Del Goetz. "I know a hood when I see one," she hurried on, "and I think that one was sent to kill me."

Goetz had been staring toward them. The accusing finger caused him to gape and act in a guilty, indecisive manner at first, but now it seemed that he had decided to bluff it out, assuming a studied air of indifference as he turned away and slumped down in his seat.

"There!" said Julie. "Look at that! He was about to run for it, but changed his mind."

The driver said something to his partner who got out and began to walk easily toward the convertible.

"We'll check him, Miss," said the driver, giving up all pretense. "Meantime," he ordered, "you wait right there."

Del never once believed I'd give him away, thought Julie as the cop halted beside the convertible and Goetz slowly glanced up. *Too many easy scores and you get careless, Del,* she told him silently. *My, my, how cocksure of ourselves we do become . . .*

Suddenly there was a sharp, whip-lashing shot. Apparently Goetz had pretended to reach for his identification and had pro-

duced a gun instead. The cop staggered back and collapsed in a dead heap as Goetz started his car and stormed ahead.

Instantly his partner barked something into the microphone of his police radio, then gunned after Goetz, tires smoking, siren howling.

All at once, thought Julie with a twisted smile, *how very unimportant I've become . . .*

Fifteen minutes later she was cozily belted in her seat and the plane was lifting off the ground. Abruptly she told the pilot she had changed her mind about the destination. Now she wanted to land at the edge of a small city some ninety miles to the north. She knew there was a perfectly good airstrip and did he mind?

The pilot smiled and replied that he certainly didn't mind, especially since she was paying the tab. He changed course and delivered her to the new destination.

From the barren airstrip she took a taxi to a car rental agency and at dusk she began to wind her way over narrow, rutted roads into a dense wilderness of tall trees, ever rising hills and mountain lakes. As night came, the wildness and isolation of the countryside deepened. Towns were widely scattered, their sparse populations already sealed in dark little tombs

of slumber, the countryside asleep.

There was scarcely an eye of light anywhere and between one village and another, not a car for endless miles; no problem, no gleaming threat in her rearview mirror.

A few minutes past ten she mounted a hill, slid below through a ghostly cluster of darkened shacks and began to circle a lake. At the far side, in the most deserted region, she left the main road and swung down a furrowed lane to a log-ribbed cabin. The cabin was small and crude, its windows nearly blind with a coating of frost.

She cut motor and lights and for a moment sat peering into the darkness, trembling a little, allowing the landscape to grow up out of the night and take shape in her memory.

*A secret, lonely place I leave you.
No other soul will have a clue . . .
How quaint and nostalgic; how
kind of sad and beautiful,* she thought, and for a quick heartbeat or two, she felt the blunted scalpel of her conscience probing. A little over five years back she and Barney had come in summer to this green-rolling, pine-fragrant and lake-jeweled region on a last minutes impulse. They had been married in June and had gone to Europe on their honeymoon. At least, Barney called it a honeymoon,

though the word in his mouth had a foreign sound and there was little in the experience of that romantic flavor she had once, a hundred years ago, attached to her lacy visions of the honeymoon.

Arriving in New York from Europe, Barney had unexpectedly purchased a new, expensive convertible, and this had triggered the impromptu notion that they should exercise the car and their spirits with a long, scenic trip. Barney had been entranced by this particular lake and, finding no cabins available for rent in that season, he had simply bought one. He was that sort of guy.

They remained close to a month at the cabin. Departing, in a rare moment of extreme sadness and sensitivity, Barney had remarked that these had been the only real days of happiness and peace he had ever known. There was enough loot to keep them at the lake for a lifetime, he had said. Why he was driven to move on to organized chaos and danger, he himself could not fathom.

It was then, as they were preparing to leave, that Barney had a small flash of inspiration. The cabin by the lake would be a secret place, known only to themselves, and if ever a time came when they wanted to split from the other three and hide without danger of

betrayal, or if ever they became separated in flight from the law, this would be their meeting place, their sanctuary.

It seemed dramatic and important at the time, but soon so many more dramatic, more important events filled their hectic lives, it was consigned to a kind of mental, if not actual, oblivion—until now.

Julie opened her suitcase and from it removed a long-handled, wide-beam flashlight. Behind its lighted cone she skirted the cabin and crunched down a twisting path between shadowy trees toward the lake, silvery patches of which could be seen in the moonlight.

Below this place a tiny square. Beside a giant circle, bare . . .

Of course! The tiny square was the boathouse beside the giant circle, bare—the lake:

Open padlock . . . She did, with the brass key from her purse. Then she had to kick leaves and twigs from in front of the door. Inside the gray-boarded, paint-peeling shed, there was a damp, lake-pungent cold. In the refracted splay of light from the flash, her fitful breathing whitened visibly, like nervous puffs of smoke ejected.

Flinging the beam at crouching, leaning, suspended things—an

overturned canoe, paddles against a wall beside an ax, a rusting outboard motor hung from a chain; nets and other fishing gear shelved or pegged—she stood motionless in an awesome vacuum of silence, disturbed only now and then by whispered little sounds beyond any real definition. Once she heard something like snow being crushed softly under a stealthy foot but got a tight rein on her imagination so that it could not carry her off on the run, screaming at the night.

The lake side of the boathouse extended over the water and there was an interior slip for the launching of boats. The surface of the water in the slip was blanketed by a paper-thin, translucent crust of ice. Intimidated, really terrified by the press of silence, the depth of her isolation, the enormity of the prize, Julie paused at the edge of the slip and peered down.

Fastened to a cleat, a strong coil of rope descended to the water, disappeared below the surface.

Down on knees and dare to hope . . . Obediently she assumed the position, almost as if she were praying.

Then slowly pull a vanishing rope. Setting the flash beside her so that it illumined the task, she grasped the rope in her gloved hands and heaved. At first she couldn't budge the rope, but then

it slowly gave toward her, a few labored inches at a time, until a square, shiny box broke surface. It was about the size of a small trunk and constructed of lightweight aluminum.

Now it seemed to Julie that a certain amount of water must have seeped into the box, for it was too heavy for her to lift further. Consequently, she quickly looped the rope around the cleat, so that at least the box could not slide back.

For a minute she rested, her mind embracing a million, some two hundred thousand cash in waterproof sacks, Neal Tracy, Mexico City, the entire bought-and-paid-for world. Standing, she glanced about, seeking a point of leverage. She found it immediately in the form of a horizontal beam just overhead.

Tossing the end of the stiff, wet rope over the beam, she pulled it taut. Then she freed the rope from the cleat, took up slack, and with all her strength combined with the weight of her body, brought the box to a position just over the rim of the slip. She swung it in and let it drop to the wood flooring where it landed with a solid thump.

The lid of the box was secured by means of hasp and staple, around which a length of copper wire had been twisted. Kneeling

again, trembling from the cold, the fear and excitement, Julie undid the wire and lifted the hasp. Hands poised, she took a nervous gulp of air and hurled the lid open. It fell back with a moist shudder.

She stared down into the box and a grotesque, disorganized, loathsome horror, stared back at her. At first glance, shocked nearly mindless, she rejected the sight, telling herself it was only a dismembered dummy, placed there as a gruesome joke.

But then, with focused, fascinated attention, she looked again—and knew that it was the corpse of Neal Tracy.

“Surprises come in all shapes and sizes, don’t they, Julie?” The voice was ponderously amused, mocking. It pulled down the soft curtain of silence in the room with a vaulted kind of echo.

She saw a shadowed outline in a blur across her shoulder. Her hand darted for the flash, aimed it at the door. For one ghastly second, she almost believed it was Barney, but of course it wasn’t. It was his brother, Brick.

She was petrified, couldn’t find a single word in the empty pit of her fear. Squinting, he grew toward her, appeared immense to Julia, still on her knees. He bent swiftly and gathered the light from her hand.

"Expecting you," he said. "Didn't know quite when. I been here since right after they fried poor Barney. Up there, in the cabin. Not a bad little place. Comfortable. Kerosine burner and some canned stuff, that's all you need."

"Why—" she said, calling her voice back from an infinite distance. "Why—did—you—"

Brick placed the flash on a shelf so that it drenched the scene in a dreary pattern of light, behind which he became obscured as he crouched against the wall.

"Awhile back," he said, "Barney had a hunch. He suspected you and Tracy were cozy. It was only a hunch, nothing he could prove, but that's why he didn't tell you where he hid the cash after the stickup. Then they spied that hot car he was wheeling and next thing he was in the county can, sweating murder one."

"He had a lot of time to think and the more he thought— Anyway, he wanted me to check you and Tracy out from A to Zebra. He had someone bring me a fat roll for the job, expense money, you might call it."

"So I hired a couple of guys to peep, and they rented this garage apartment across from your place. They had some high-power glasses and around the clock they kept you in sight. When you led them

to that hotel, I came on the run. I spread some dough and I got the answer—the double room bit."

"We tailed Tracy from the hotel and we grabbed him. We took him somewhere and we made him talk. Oh man, how we made him talk! He spelled the whole thing out, from play-day one to Mexico City, so I went back to Barney and I told him. And I said, 'So what you want me to do with this lover-boy, and this lover-girl?'"

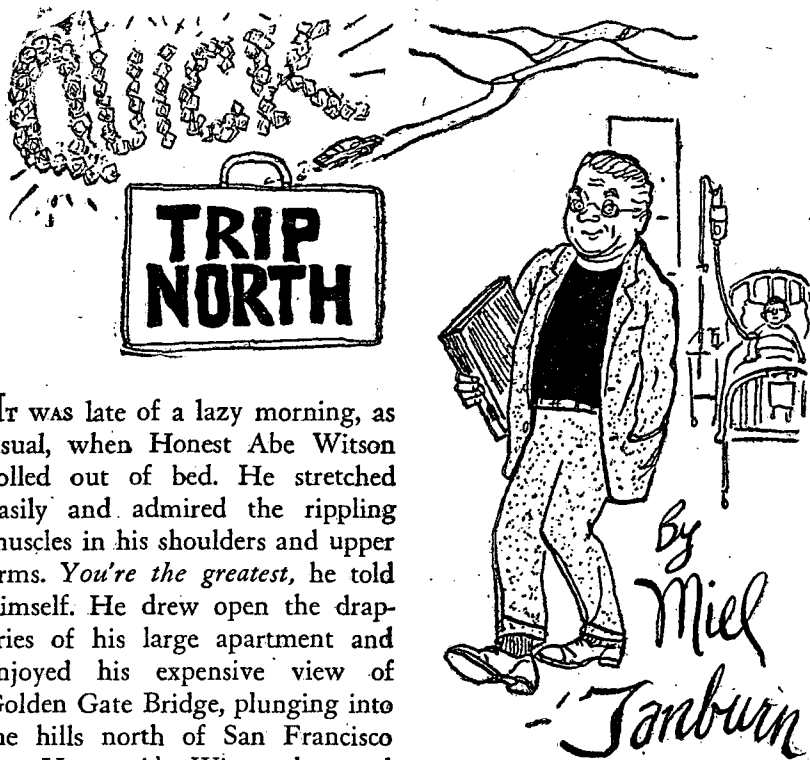
"Well, you got his answer, there in that box. A beaut, huh? Sure, the loot was here all the time and it would've been yours. But you goofed, honey, you goofed! So, in a crazy kinda way, Barney changed his will—and I got the whole bundle. For services rendered, you might say."

He paused and seemed to move slightly, to shift his position. Then he said, "I was never much for gratitude and stuff like that, and I never had no more feelin' for my brother than anyone else. But a million, two hundred thousand clams buys a lotta loyalty, even from the dead."

"So I got one more little service to render and then I'm gonna mark it 'paid-in-full', Barney-boy."

Suddenly he stepped forward into the light and the last thing Julie saw was the blade of the ax descending.

He laughs best who laughs last, particularly if he laughs first as well, and throughout.



It was late of a lazy morning, as usual, when Honest Abe Witson rolled out of bed. He stretched easily and admired the rippling muscles in his shoulders and upper arms. *You're the greatest*, he told himself. He drew open the draperies of his large apartment and enjoyed his expensive view of Golden Gate Bridge, plunging into the hills north of San Francisco Bay. Honest Abe Witson showered and then vigorously rubbed himself dry with a thick bath towel that bore in large block letters his personal monogram—HAW.

It was time for another job. Witson needed to fatten up his

bank account. He asked himself who it would be this time. The Bank detective? Father Murphy? Gigolo George? Light-Fingered Leonard? He could do them all. His repertoire was endless.

Witson decided on Father Murphy. He hadn't been a man of the cloth for a long time. Besides, he smiled in happy reminiscence, he had pulled off some of his finest schemes disguised as poor Father Murphy, the limping clergyman.

Witson packed. Then he rode the elevator down to his garage, whistling a lively hymn he remembered from his childhood. *You're the greatest*, he told himself.

Witson didn't pull jobs close to home. He drove across the Bay Bridge and headed northeast from the city. When he reached the Sacramento Valley, he headed north up the main highway. It eventually carried him over the mountains into Oregon, and still he kept driving. In Washington he drove as far as Puget Sound before he pulled off on a shoulder of the road and changed his clothes. Then he proceeded, more sedately, as befitted a man of the cloth, to a community near Seattle, where he checked into a motel.

The clerk was only too happy to help Witson with his suitcase. Witson had signed the guest register as "Father Murphy," and Father Murphy seemed so valiantly good-natured, despite his handicap. Father Murphy's left hand was clenched tightly and his left foot was turned awkwardly inward, forcing him to walk with a lurch-

ing gait. Even the left side of his face was affected; it had a dull, sagging appearance. Yet Father Murphy's eyes twinkled as he said, "Bless you, son," and gave the clerk a quarter.

The motel was a block from Sacred Heart Hospital. The next morning, bright and early, Father Murphy limped over to the hospital. Indeed, during the next two days he spent much of his time at the hospital, chatting with staff members, offering helpful suggestions, comforting patients. In the afternoons, while a sea breeze blew, Father Murphy hobbled through the town, smiling at people who looked with sympathy at the handicapped priest. He called on businessmen, listening solicitously to their problems. He window-shopped, particularly at jewelry stores. He spent some time in pleasant conversation with several jewelers.

On the third day, shortly before lunch, Father Murphy telephoned one of the jewelers, Henry Cutter. He asked Cutter to bring several diamonds and diamond rings from his store to the hospital. "It's quite a delicate matter," Father Murphy assured the jeweler. "I'll explain when you arrive."

Father Murphy rocked in a comfortable wicker chair that had a view of the tree-lined street, and

soon he saw the perspiring jeweler, sample case in hand, trudging up the sidewalk. Father Murphy rose when Cutter climbed up the front steps to enter the lobby of the hospital, slightly out of breath from his brisk walk.

"Bless you for coming," Father Murphy smiled warmly. He guided the jeweler to a corner of the lobby and softly confided in him. An old friend and parishioner, he told the jeweler, was a patient in the hospital, in critical condition. His friend's wedding anniversary was the following week and the man wanted to purchase a gift for his devoted wife. "I don't wish to upset you," Father Murphy said, "but his illness is such that—well, the doctors have told him they can't guarantee his recovery. He asked me whether I could arrange to bring some good diamonds for him to look at. He is convinced it will be the last present he will be able to give his wife. He wants to be sure the ring is really worthy of her—she so soon to be a widow."

Delighted at the prospect of a good sale, Cutter put the sample case on his lap and opened it up.

"My, those *do* seem to be handsome gems," Father Murphy said. "I suppose they must be worth a thousand dollars or more?"

"More like five," Cutter said.

Father Murphy made an embar-

assed gesture. "I'm afraid I don't know much about diamonds."

"This is a good selection," Cutter said. "I don't know exactly what your friend has in mind, but let's go find out."

"I'll return as soon as I can." Father Murphy extended his hand for the sample case. When Cutter hesitated, Father Murphy admonished, still quietly and sadly but with an edge of severity to his voice, "The man is critically ill, Mr. Cutter. I thought you understood. He's not allowed visitors at all, the poor soul. As his spiritual adviser, of course, I see him as often as necessary."

Father Murphy motioned Cutter to a chair. "I'll be back soon. Please wait for me. Here, take this comfortable rocker—it should refresh you." Father Murphy took the sample case, limped slowly across the lobby and through a door leading to the hospital wards.

Father Murphy limped through a white corridor, through another door into a small, flower-scented outdoor patio, across the patio, through a waiting room into the hospital parking lot and across the parking lot to a back street that took him to his motel. His room was paid in advance and his bags were packed. Father Murphy changed back into his street clothes and drove carefully but quickly out

of town. He'd be in another state before they began looking for him. He whistled a happy tune, stuck a cigarette between his lips and punched the car's cigarette lighter, which bore his monogram—HAW.

Witson spent that night three hundred miles away, in a cabin at a rustic resort on the Oregon coast. It had been a nice drive south, with snowpeaked Mount Rainier painted on the sky like a mural, then across the blue Columbia River and west into the sunset, beneath salmon-and-black clouds. Witson congratulated himself on another profitable escapade as Father Murphy, and slept like an innocent child.

He awoke before dawn, in such a fine mood that he decided to stay an extra day before driving home. A few miles up the coast he found a charter fishing boat that had room for another passenger. Even though the fish weren't biting and he hardly reeled in anything worth keeping, Witson had a good day, with pleasant companionship. A vacationing sporting-goods salesman from Sioux City, Iowa, was particularly amiable. When the boat docked that afternoon, Witson bid friendly good-byes and drove back to pay for his cabin and check out.

The sheriff was waiting at his cabin. "I'd like you to come down to the courthouse with me," the

sheriff said quietly, pleasantly.

"What for?"

"Just routine. Are you all right, man? You're white as a sheet."

Witson recovered with a smile. "The ocean was a little rough," he said. "I guess I'm not the sea dog I thought I was. What's the trouble, Sheriff?"

"Oh, there's no trouble," the sheriff said. "There *was*, but we got it solved. You see, these cabins were all broken into last night, but we've captured the burglar. Now there's some property down at headquarters you'll have to identify."

"But I haven't lost anything, Sheriff," Witson said, still smiling. "I've got my wallet in my pocket. I slept with it under my pillow. All I had besides that, was a suitcase, and it was here when I left the cabin this morning."

"I want you to come along anyway."

"Okay," Witson agreed. "Can I check out of my room first?"

"I don't see why not," the sheriff said.

Inside the cabin, Witson made a desperate, tight-lipped search. Cutter's sample case with the jewelry was gone. Someone had broken into the room, all right, while Witson was sleeping like a baby. Now the sheriff had the diamonds. Did he know they were stolen? He

must know. Witson drove his own car downtown, following the sheriff to the courthouse.

"You see," the sheriff said in his office, "you were the last guest to check out. Now like I said, we caught the burglar earlier today, with the goods still on him. All the other guests have claimed their property, and this is what we got left."

The sheriff reached into his desk drawer and pulled out Cutter's sample case.

"By the process of elimination," the sheriff said, "this belongs to you. Right?"

Witson felt a trap closing around him, but he managed a chuckle. "I appreciate the offer, Sheriff, but it's a little early for Christmas, isn't it? That's not mine. I wonder what's in it—do you know?"

"Well, I admit we did take a peek inside. But my question is, are you going to stick with that story?"

Witson frowned. "I don't follow you."

"I hope you don't, for your sake," the sheriff said. He called through the door, "Bring in that jewelry guy!"

Witson's heart jumped when Cutter walked into the room. He had to fight an impulse to run for it. But Cutter, after a sharp glance at Witson and a momentary hesita-

tion, looked blankly at the sheriff and said, "Yes?"

"What do you mean, *yes*?" the sheriff said. "Is this the guy who robbed you, or isn't he?"

"Certainly not," the pudgy jeweler said, while Witson watched in silent astonishment.

"You mean this ain't that Father What's-his-face you told me about?" the sheriff asked.

"Father Murphy?" Cutter asked. "I should say not. I never saw this gentleman in my life."

"Well, if *he* ain't Father Murphy, and that punk we *arrested* ain't Father Murphy," the sheriff exploded, "then just who the heck *is* Father Murphy?"

"I should think you'd make it your business to find out," Cutter said, picking up his sample case and walking to the door. "And I assure you that, when you find him, I'll gladly testify at his trial."

Cutter closed the door behind him, but in a moment the door opened again and the jeweler stuck his head back in. "I'd be pleased to stand you to a drink, sir," he said to Witson, "due to the inconvenience I seem to have caused you."

The sheriff waved his hand disgustedly. "Get out of here, both of you."

Witson, relieved but amazed, walked out of the sheriff's office and followed the jeweler to a cock-

tail lounge farther down the street.

"You're a slick one, ain't you?"

Cutter asked, once they were seated over drinks in a dark corner booth."

"What do you mean?"

"You slickered me pretty good yesterday," Cutter said. "Made me a laughingstock. The newspaper ran a story after I reported it to the police. Made a fool out of me."

"Why didn't you turn me in just now?"

The jeweler narrowed his eyes and put his face close to Witson's. "I figure you owe me something, mister, and you can't pay it off if you're in jail. You see what I'm getting at?"

Witson nodded. "I can see black-mail clear enough."

"Call it what you want," Cutter said. "I call it damages, for my loss of reputation. Say—a thousand dollars' worth?"

"Or you go back to the sheriff?"

"You're darn tootin'." Cutter sat back in the booth and looked triumphantly at Witson.

Witson chewed his lips. He looked worried. "You got your diamonds back—ain't that enough for you?"

Cutter shook his head.

Witson had been thinking fast. "You know, you *could* lose those diamonds again."

Cutter hugged the sample case to

his chest. "Are you kidding? Not a chance!"

"I mean, like on purpose."

Cutter looked at him suspiciously. "Spell that out?"

"Look, you've got a long ride home," Witson explained. "You're going to have to stop for dinner. What's to keep someone from breaking into your car and stealing that sample case?"

"Nothing—except I lose five thousand dollars' worth of diamonds."

Witson leaned closer to the jeweler and gave him a wink. "I figure a smart businessman like you carries plenty of insurance."

Cutter blinked. "Go on, mister. I'm listening."

"I'll level with you," Witson said. "I don't have a thousand bucks to pay you off. But I do know where I can get rid of those diamonds. For two, maybe three thousand, depends how much heat is on. If you go home now—turn me in or not, it doesn't matter—all you've got is your diamonds back. But if you let me fence them for you and send you the dough, you make a couple thousand profit. How's that grab you?"

"I'm interested," Cutter said. "You say I give the diamonds back to you. Then I go home and report that they're stolen. Boy, the newspaper will love *that*. Then I collect

the insurance. And then you send me the money you get for selling the diamonds?"

"That's the package," Witson said. "But you know, all I have is your word that they're worth five thousand. If I was your insurance company, how would I know you didn't lose maybe *ten* thousand bucks' worth? What do you say, Cutter? A deal?"

Cutter licked his lips. "You *are* slick, mister. I knew I was doing the right thing when I didn't turn you in. Okay, a deal."

The jeweler stuck out his hand, to shake on it, but then he drew his hand back suddenly. "Wait a minute! How do I know you aren't slickering me *again*? What's to keep you from just disappearing?"

Witson pulled a billfold out of his pocket and threw it on the table. "This!" he said. "That's my wallet. You keep it for ransom. If you don't hear from me in a week, go to the cops. That's got all my ID in it—driver's license, credit cards, the works. Here, I'll take the money out of it, but you keep the rest. That ought to satisfy you."

Cutter closed his hand around the billfold. "That sounds safe enough to me. I guess I've got you over a barrel, all right, mister. Let's go."

Outside, Witson opened Cutter's car door for him and helped him

climb in. "You sure you've got everything?"

The jeweler looked at his sample case, tucked under Witson's arm, and laughed. "So long, sucker," he said. "Write soon." He gunned his motor and drove off.

Witson got into his own car and headed home down the coast highway. The blue Pacific leaped outside his window and Witson grinned widely. *Another success*, he thought. *Honest Abe, you're the greatest.*

Witson fingered the leather wallet lying on the front seat next to him. *Bless you, Cutter*, he thought, *you travel well-heeled.* Witson found two hundred dollars in Cutter's fat wallet, which he'd lifted when he helped the jeweler into his car. Witson laughed. *Light-Fingered Leonard strikes again!*

Witson figured: two hundred from Cutter, say three thousand for the diamonds—and another hundred-and-fifty from the wallet he just gave Cutter. Not bad for a quick trip north. Of course, it was too bad about that salesman from Sioux City, who was due a surprise when Cutter turns him in to the cops.

Witson took a deep, invigorating breath of ocean breeze. He stuck a cigarette right in the middle of his huge grin and punched in his cigarette lighter. HAW.

I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw. Hamlet



PERHAPS you've passed this way before. The valley is sleepy in the summertime, but very beautiful, with lush fields of corn and oats rising against a backdrop of wooded hills that stretch for miles toward the horizon. Sometimes, especially in the late afternoons, a hawk or two will come circling overhead, looking for the evening

meal or perhaps only for a place to light.

Tucker Baines passed this way, and sometimes on a summer's night they still tell his story in the valley.

June is the warmest month, even warmer than July for some reason, maybe because on a July afternoon the heat is often broken by a blowing thunderstorm that comes in low over the hills. June, especially late June, is something else again; hot and humid without a chance of relief, when the big flies buzz around over the fields and roads, and even the hawks are listless in their circling. It was on such a day that Tucker Baines came into the valley.

He was, first of all, a wanderer. Born in the swampy Everglades of Florida to parents who ran a roadside alligator farm with a marked indifference to his upbringing, Tuck had learned early to shift for himself. He'd left them to their reptiles and each other at the age of sixteen, and headed nebulously north toward a world he knew only from comic books and mov-

ies which he saw infrequently.

Tucker was also a musician of sorts, always had been since the age of seven when a drunken uncle made him a present of a shiny silver-plated harmonica. It had grown up with him, serving at times as his only link to the more settled joys of boyhood in the dismal swamp-side house.

So he wandered north with his harmonica, working by day in dusty gas stations that sat by the side of the highways like bulbous tumors, waiting to pump new life into the pipeline; life, and sometimes death. He remembered the time a tractor trailer had jackknifed on a curve down the highway, and taken a carload of vacationers with it down a grassy slope.

In many ways he hated the highways, hated especially the odor and clang of the gas stations where he worked. Perhaps that was why he started working nights with his harmonica, playing for his supper at the little greasy truck stops on the road north. When he was eighteen he was playing for drinks, even though he was still under age by most state laws, but he was not really a drinking man. One night he'd had too much and ran his jackknife into a man's gut outside a roadhouse in North Carolina. He didn't like to drink or fight or get into trouble, but sometimes it hap-

pened. Sometimes he moved out in a hurry, carrying only his harmonica and a few meager articles of clothing.

Gradually the harmonica became the center of his life. The tavern owners liked him, because he was a clean-shaven young man who could play *Night Train* as easily as *Greensleeves*, and because he worked cheap and always showed up. The customers liked him too, liked the sounds which he coaxed from the instrument, hunched over it on a plain wooden stool with the single spotlight riveting their attention. Perhaps he could have made it all the way to Nashville or New York with that sound, but he was too much of a wanderer to be happy in the city. There was always a dirt road to be followed off the main highway, and that was how he happened into the sleepy valley so far from home.

The first person to see Tucker Baines as he wandered down the center of the road with his harmonica and jackknife and paperboard suitcase was Mariam Coty, the postmaster's daughter. She had lived all of her life in the valley, venturing out only on occasional shopping trips to the big plaza beyond the river. Some spoke of her as a strange, shy girl, but in fact she was only lonely, bored with the sameness of the tassel-haired farm

boys who were her only acquaintances. This boy coming down the road now, who surely was no more than nineteen or twenty, was a new face, a new interest.

"Lookin' for somebody?" she asked, coming out of the mowed field to intercept him. "This is the Coty place."

"I . . . no, not really." He paused to rest his suitcase, and she saw that he was indeed handsome, with a firm, suntanned face and deep blue eyes that sparkled when he spoke. "I'm looking for a place to stay, I guess." He glanced uncertainly toward the western horizon, as if calculating the remaining hours of daylight.

"A hotel? We don't have any in the valley."

"No, maybe just a drinking place, where they got a cot in back." He pulled something from his pocket. "I play the harmonica, see? People pay me to play."

She stared, entranced, at the shiny metal instrument with its double line of holes. No one in the valley was very musical except Miss Gordon, the piano teacher, and Mariam knew of only one other person in the whole area who played a harmonica. "I suppose you could play at the River Bend," she said, speaking softly. "It's the only night spot in the whole valley, if you could call it

that. They've got a big new stereo jukebox, and the kids go dancing there on weekends. But I don't know if they'd let you sleep there."

"Could you show me where it is?" he asked, picking up the battered suitcase once more. "If it's not too far."

She fell into step beside him. "It's not far."

He liked the girl from that first moment, liked the valley and the tiny village that seemed to-form its core. She introduced him to her father, and to a big man named Hark who seemed to be the sheriff. Then she took him to the River Bend, where a few farmhands stood by a rough plank bar, drinking beer with a self-conscious air of guilt. It was early, not yet supper time, and perhaps they felt they should still have been in the fields.

The place itself was almost gloomy in the afternoon sun, and the odor of beer was heavy in the air. In the evening, when the lights came on and darkness settled outside, it would be better. Tuck knew these places. He'd seen so many of them in the past three years.

"The kids dance in here," the girl told him, leading the way to a bare back room where an unplugged juke box was the only adornment. "Not tonight, though.

Just weekends," she apologized.

She introduced him then to an aproned bartender. His name was Smith, though it might have been anything else. Tuck had forgotten many faces like that in his travels. "Harmonica? Like Big Ben up in the hills, huh?"

"I don't know Big Ben," Tuck told him.

"Just as well. Hairy and mean." He wiped at the bar with a damp cloth. "I'm just managing the place. Don't know if I could hire you or not."

"All I'd want is food and a place to sleep. And any tips they throw me."

"They don't throw tips at the River Bend," Smith said with a chuckle. Then, "Let's hear you play, boy. Won't do no harm."

So he played for them, played as he had in a hundred other roadside places; head bent, eyes closed, making the only kind of music he knew how, cupping his hands around the silver harmonica and playing, playing. When he paused between songs he noticed that the farmhands had moved in from the bar to listen, and he was not surprised. People had always listened to him when he played.

He ran through a shortened version of *Casey Jones*, and then did *Blue-Tail Fly*. He played some ballads of the Scottish border that a

man in Carolina had taught him once, then finished with his favorite *Night Train* and a jazz version of *John Henry*. It was a lot of music to get out of a little harmonica.

"Never heard one played that good," the bartender admitted. "Guess I could take you on for a week anyway, till the boss gets back."

Tucker Baines nodded. He hadn't expected any other decision.

When the boss came back, he liked Tuck's playing too. Most of all he liked the crowds of kids who were coming every night now to the River Bend. They sat and listened and sometimes danced; and often toward the end of the evening they even threw dimes and quarters onto the little stage where Tuck sat and played his wonderful harmonica.

He saw the girl, Mariam, some nights after he finished, and once he sat for a long time with Sheriff Hark, talking about his travels and listening to a history of the valley's residents. Hark was that sort of a man, big, talkative, interesting.

"You plan to stay around long, son?" he asked Tuck one night.

"Don't know, Sheriff. I'm a sort of a wanderer, I guess. But it's peaceful here. Don't hardly see that there's any work for you."

"I try to keep it that way," Sheriff Hark said. "Sometimes I have



to crack a few heads to do it, specially at harvest time."

Tucker Baines had been playing at the River Bend for two weeks when he finally met Big Ben. He'd heard a lot about the man, mostly from Mariam and the kids who came around. They'd all heard Ben and his harmonica, mostly at

church suppers and family picnics. Tuck was better, they assured him, but Big Ben was pretty darned good.

One night when he was leaving the River Bend, figuring to stroll a while before bedtime, Tuck heard someone hail him from a parked car. "Come over here a minute,

boy! Got a question for you!"

He walked over, squinting his eyes against glaring headlights, and saw at last a great mountain of a man stuffed behind the wheel of the ten-year-old sedan. "You want something?"

"I hear you play harmonica," the big man said, speaking through a bushy mustache that almost obscured his mouth.

"I play a little."

"One of these?" the man asked, holding out his hand. In it rested a silver-plated harmonica.

"Just like that." Tuck studied the man in the reflected headlights. "You must be that Big Ben they talk about."

"Hal! How did you figure that one out?" The man shifted uncomfortably, shoving his massive stomach around the steering wheel. "I'd like to hear you play, to play with you sometime. I was listening from here, and it sounded pretty good."

"Thanks."

"I got a cabin back in the hills. How about coming up?"

"Not tonight, thanks. I'm pretty bushed."

"Tomorrow, the next night. I'll pick you up when you finish."

Tuck didn't really want to go with the man, but there seemed no way out. He had a youthful sense of arrogance that told him he

could best the mountain of a man in any contest, musical or physical, and perhaps that helped decide him to go. "Maybe tomorrow," he said.

"I'll be here."

The old car pulled away almost at once, and Tuck watched until its taillights had vanished around a distant curve in the old dirt road.

By the following night, Tuck had forgotten all about the odd invitation. He'd spent the afternoon with Mariam, swimming in an old quarry a few miles off, and then he'd come back to the River Bend to have a light supper with Sheriff Hark. He was growing to like the man, to like most everything about the village. He wondered if maybe, just maybe, it was time to settle down.

He played until midnight, giving the kids a solid hour of the newer folk songs and country tunes. He'd picked up a lot of them listening to the jukebox in the afternoons, and he played them well within the harmonica's limited range.

When he dropped the harmonica into his jacket pocket and stepped outside for some air, he saw the familiar car waiting across the street. All right, he decided, he would go with Big Ben. Certainly no harm could come from it. He went back inside for a quick beer,

then went across and climbed into the old car.

"I was thinking you weren't coming," the big man said.

"I came, I came. I don't want to stay out all night, though. I gotta get some sleep." He'd had three or four beers all told, and he was feeling a bit drowsy.

Big Ben drove the old car over the rough dirt roads as if he knew them like the back of his hand. He probably did, since he'd had a long time to learn them. "I was just a kid during prohibition," he said, talking as he drove. "I used to make the runs with my older brother over these same roads."

Finally they reached the house, which was no more than a log cabin set a little ways off the road. Perhaps someone had built it for hunting or even for living, but that had been a long time before Big Ben moved in. It was probably no more disorganized than a bachelor's quarters in a city might be, but there was a difference. The canned goods, the piled newspapers, the jazz records—they all seemed slightly musty, maybe like Ben himself as he moved through the mess and motioned Tuck to a chair.

"The place isn't much," he said, not really apologizing but only explaining. "After my father and brother got killed, my mother sorta

went to pieces. I've been here alone a long time."

"They were killed on the highway?"

Big Ben lowered himself carefully onto a chair. "Went through a roadblock with a trunkload of moonshine. Smashed themselves against a tree. I endured." He smiled and picked up his harmonica. In a moment he was running through *St. Louis Woman*, then switching in mid-refrain to *Gloomy Sunday* and the less familiar *Unquiet Grave*.

"That's good," Tuck told him when he paused to hit the harmonica against his palm. "Damn good."

"I used to play like you, till I put on all this weight. I used to do a lot of things." He squeezed himself out of the chair and brought out a half-full bottle of cheap rye whiskey. "Here, have a few gulps and then play for me."

Tuck accepted the bottle and passed his harmonica to Big Ben in turn. "Try mine."

The big man took it and started to play, then grimaced in pain. "Can't play it," he said, handing it back. "Damned mustache gets caught." He started playing again on his own instrument, then waved to Tuck to join in.

They played and drank like that for more than an hour, first singly and then together, until the room

began to blur and spin Tuck's vision. "I have to get back," he mumbled at last.

"Hell, you don't need to ever get back. Them girls'll wait for you."

"Gotta—"

"That Mariam's pretty good, isn't she? I hear tell you go for her. I'd go for her myself if I was fifty pounds thinner. I'd even—"

"Shut up!" Tuck wobbled to his feet and struck out at the man. He shouldn't drink, man, how he shouldn't drink! But then why do people always say things to—

"You lookin' for a fight, boy? Big Ben could break you in two! Big Ben could fix your mouth so you'd never play a harmonica again."

Maybe that had been it, the reason for it all. Maybe the man had brought him here out of some twisted jealousy to maim or kill him. Tuck didn't wait to think, to reason any further. Suddenly the jackknife was in his hand, and it was no stranger there. He sank it up to the hilt in Big Ben's flabby stomach and watched the surprise spread over the man's face.

"What? What do you think you're doing, boy?"

The knife came out and in again, and Big Ben stumbled against the table, upsetting bottle and glasses and harmonicas. "Diel!" Tuck breathed. "Can't you diel!"

"I been trying all my life," Big Ben gasped. "Maybe you come just to help me along."

Tuck stabbed him three more times before the big man went to his knees and the blood began to bubble at his mouth. Then, desperate with drink and cold with fear, he slashed out at the offered throat and ended it.

For a long time Tucker Baines stood staring at the body, as if wishing it alive again. There had been other times, but nothing like this—he'd never really killed a man before, never taken a human life. The sight of it, the blood and the great bloated body, had sobered him almost at once, and now he wondered what to do.

In the past he had always run from trouble, but this was something different, something dangerous. To run away would be an admission of guilt. He began running over it in his mind. No one had seen him with Big Ben, no one knew he'd come here. He remembered touching nothing except the bottle and glass and harmonica, and perhaps the edge of the table. Now he quickly wiped these off, and wiped off the knife as well, dropping it into his pocket.

Still, he could not take chances. He found some fuel oil for the stove and emptied it onto a stack of newspapers in one corner. The

place would burn like tinder, body and all. Let them think what they wanted, after that.

He tossed a match from the doorway and watched the papers catch and flare. Then, at the last possible instant, he remembered the harmonica. It was still there on the floor by the overturned table. He ran back toward the crackling flames and scooped it up, then retreated as the ceiling timbers caught the first glow of the fire.

He was halfway down the hill, traveling through the darkened fields, when it started to rain. No matter—behind him the flames had already broken through the log roof of the cabin. There would be very little left for Sheriff Hark to examine.

She saw him the very next morning, early, strolling up the hill to join the crowd. He looked almost as if he hadn't slept, and she wondered if he'd been up late practicing on his harmonica.

"Hi, Mariam," he said, stopping at her side in the trampled grass. "What's the excitement?"

"It's Ben's place—Big Ben's—it burned down during the night. They say he's dead inside."

He glanced past her head at the little knot of spectators, at the steaming remains of the cabin. The heavy rain had doused the fire be-

fore the destruction was total, but only blackened timbers were visible from where they stood. "That's too bad," Tuck told her. "I never did get to meet him."

"He was the only one I ever knew could play like you."

"Yeah." He moved a little away from her and seemed to be thinking. She wondered about what.

That night Tucker got to the River Bend early, and found Sheriff Hark already there waiting for him. He plugged in the jukebox to listen to a couple of folk tunes he was learning, then sat down at the sheriff's table.

"Too bad about Big Ben," he said, speaking first.

"Darned shame," Sheriff Hark agreed. "You ever meet him?"

"Never," Tuck told him, shaking his head in confirmation of the statement. "Heard tell he was pretty good on the harmonica, though."

"That he was." Sheriff Hark sighed. "There was a little basement storage room under the cabin, and when the floor burned away Ben's body dropped through. The harmonica was there too, with him till the end. Looked just like the one you play."

"Was he pretty badly burned?"

"Not too much. Like I say, he fell through the floor before the fire did too much damage. And

then it started to rain." Sheriff Hark was staring down at his hands. "Funny thing—looks like somebody killed him."

"Killed?"

"Yeah. Fiye or six stab wounds in the stomach, and his throat cut. Fire couldn't have done all that."

The kids were beginning to drift in. It was almost time for Tuck to start playing. "Who'd want to kill him?" he asked, slipping the harmonica from his pocket.

The sheriff shrugged his rounded shoulders. "A wanderer, probably. Someone passing by. Ben never had any money."

"You'll have to excuse me. I gotta start playing."

The sheriff nodded. Then, almost casually, "Say, Tuck, could I see your harmonica for a minute?"

"Sure." He passed it across the table.

"You ever have a mustache?" Sheriff Hark asked, turning the shiny instrument over and over in his hands.

"No. Why?"

The harmonica caught at a stray beam of light and reflected it toward the ceiling. Sheriff Hark looked uncomfortable. "Hell, I'm not one of those storybook detectives. I'd be lost with a fingerprint or a footprint. But I know my people, here in the valley." He took another harmonica from his pocket

and laid it on the table next to Tuck's. "You say you never met Big Ben?"

"That's what I said."

"Well . . ." He shifted uncomfortably. "This harmonica was the one I found by his body. I think it's yours."

"You're wrong," Tuck said, suddenly breaking into a sweat. "This here's mine."

"Look close at it, boy. You'll see a thin line of solder near the top, above the row of holes. It's a trick fellows with bushy mustaches use to keep from gettin' them caught between the body of the instrument and the silvery top piece." He paused, looking unhappy. "This was Ben's harmonica, boy. He couldn't play one without that soldered top piece. You musta picked up the wrong one after you killed him."

"It's time," Tuck said, wetting his lips. "I have to play." His hand hesitated over the twin instruments, and finally rested on Big Ben's harmonica.

"Play," the sheriff told him. "I'll be waiting."

Tucker Baines nodded, walked over to his stool, and began to play very softly an old mountain melody. Somewhere outside a hawk drifted slowly across the evening sky, and the breeze was soft in the valley that night.

One may accept failure as inevitable, but success, it seems, provokes self-analysis.



The SECOND Debut

by Arthur Porges

THE morning after was a rough day for the laboratory mice. Ordinarily Dr. Marek, like any good scientist, sacrificed them without either cruelty or compassion, but this time, even if his actions were not overtly sadistic, he took savage, irrational pleasure in each execu-

tion as if by robbing the little animals of their lives and complexes, he somehow mitigated last night's disappointment.

The biochemist had only two great loves—obsessions; actually—in life: his own specialty, and the piano. Finding himself without any ability at the keyboard, in spite of lessons from the best teachers, he had tried again, vicariously, on his younger brother Walter.

As the boy's guardian, their parents having been killed during the Hungarian rebellion, Dr. Marek

had a free hand. So, from the age of six, Walter had been given the most rigorous and expensive musical education available. He had shown some talent as a pianist but no trace of real genius, even though there were many gifted Mareks among their ancestors. Unfortunately, the biochemist had succumbed to wishful thinking, and saw more in the boy than was there.

Walter's concert debut the night before had been a debacle. Technique, he had, but no insight; his Mozart was romanticized into bad Chopin; his Beethoven was thunderously empty; and he took all the storm and guts out of Bartok. The critics were merciless; how could anybody become so hopeless in a mere twenty years?

Heartbroken, Dr. Marek plunged more deeply into his work. He snubbed Walter, avoiding him like some unclean thing; and felt even worse on noting that the boy didn't realize what a flop he was. The idiot thought the critics were wrong!

Nor was it a matter of time and maturity; other pianists developed real musicianship early, or they never attained it. No, Walter simply lacked the prime requirement of his art. There was nothing to be done.

Then, not for the first time, Dr.

Marek thought of Zygmunt Jankowski, the keyboard genius with the incredible fingers of a Horowitz, the musicianship of a Rubinstein, the personality of a Paderewski. Jankowski was great at eighteen, incomparable at forty—and finished at fifty-two, his prime, fingers smashed in a car accident. After that, he had disappeared. And to think that he, Dr. Marek, had dreamed of making Walter into another Jankowski!

But some dreams die hard, and Dr. Marek was only thirty. He turned his attention to the problem of mice and music, only half aware of what he sought.

He began by conditioning a group of mice to respond to a pure musical note. When they had learned this, after many trials, he killed one-third of the sample, extracted the RNA/DNA complexes from their brains, where they were concentrated, and injected them into untrained mice. These were then taught to recognize a simple sequence of notes, a primitive melody. Then their RNA/DNA extracts were given to a fresh group. In each case of a new collection, the conditioning required fewer trials. Finally, Dr. Marek had an elite group of mice that not only could recognize a theme, but respond to it when key and tempo were changed markedly; and with

their extracts, previously untrained mice learned the same difficult chore with amazing celerity.

Now, mice are not men, and no scientist will extrapolate wildly from one species to the other but, since all life on earth is related, to bar inference completely would be just as unscientific as declaring unequivocally that mice equal men. So Dr. Marek did not stop with mice, but went on to cats, dogs, and even a few budget-straining chimps.

Two years later he sent for Walter, who had been scratching out a frustrated living by teaching music at a good but not highly-endowed college. The two brothers had seen little of each other since the concert, and Walter was understandably bitter. His own attempts to establish himself as a concert artist had failed; there were too many talented pianists with superior ability; and his technique, while adequate, could not compensate for his lack of understanding.

"You will live with me again," Dr. Marek told him crisply. He did not expect the order to be questioned, and it was not. When one has been dominated since the age of six by a strong-willed brother ten years older, revolt becomes impossible. Besides, was not Stefan a great scientist, well-paid and cre-

ative, a man too dedicated even to marry?

"Why do you want me?" the boy asked gloomily. "I have failed you as a pianist."

"That may be changed," was the cryptic reply. "Your trouble could have been due to a chemical imbalance. I mean to give you a course of injections. Then we shall see."

"What kind of injections?"

"You might think of them as a variety of vitamins; it doesn't matter. If they work, both your technique and insight will be much enhanced. But," he added sternly, "you must practice, eight hours a day. I've had the Bechstein tuned. Work, plus the injections, and who knows—by next year Walter Marek may surprise the critics."

The boy brightened. He knew little about biochemistry, but had unbounded faith in his brother.

"I shall work," he said eagerly. "It will be like old times again, Stefan."

"Except that I shall not be your judge," Dr. Marek said. "I was not objective. This time Madame Berrier shall listen to you."

She was a friend of Stefan's—a sometime mistress, in fact—and one of the greatest woman pianists of her generation. Walter knew she would set a high standard, and flinched a little. Those enormous, flaring dark eyes were hard to face

when angry, brooked no mistakes.

The injections began at once, and were unpleasant. Dr. Marek was not a physician, and had no delicacy of touch with a hypodermic. He was used to laboratory animals, that squeaked or grunted, but couldn't berate him as ham-handed. Finally, however, after Walter's vehement objections, he acquired a finer needle, and improved his technique.

Both men were soon indifferent to such minor matters, because with startling speed Walter began to make progress. His fingers improved daily, so that the arpeggios rippled out in a smooth, dazzling stream, the ponderous chords sounded with precise synchronization and clangor, the trills vibrated like a snake's rattles. Bach was sounding as he should, and not like a composition by Tchaikovsky out of Chaminade.

Nor was there any self-deception involved. Those wonderful eyes of Madame Berrier had first narrowed incredulously, and then shone opalescent as Walter played Schubert's "Wanderer Fantasy." Not since Edwin Fischer's performance had she heard anything to match it.

"Formidable!" she exclaimed, and kissed him.

A few weeks later, at the age of twenty-three, Walter Marek made

his second debut as a concert pianist. The critics—the four who bothered—came to rend, since flaying a presumptuous incompetent is one of the major rewards of the profession; they stayed, after many encores thunderously applauded, as willing captives. Walter was a handsome boy, but now he glowed with fresh beauty, and his personality had acquired a flamboyant, careless charm that was irresistible. His performance was superb from the opening "Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue" to the last number, the difficult and exciting Chopin "Etude in A Minor," sometimes called "The Winter Wind."

From then on, his progress was phenomenal. He played with all the major orchestras, made innumerable brilliant recordings, and sold out at every concert.

One morning, his face troubled, Walter came to Stefan, and said, "I wonder if I'm going mad. Something very strange happened to me just now."

Dr. Marek gave him a sharp stare, his eyes narrowing. "What is it?" he demanded.

"You know I've never studied the Hammerklavier. Well, I was sight-reading the five movement today and, all at once, there I was, playing along without looking at the music." He laughed uneasily. "It wasn't much of a performance

—after all, the Hammerklavier is a lifework—but that I should know the notes . . . it disturbs and frightens me.”

His brother became deathly white, looked years older, but his voice was steady as he said, “Come, Walter, it’s not that unusual. You have heard others play it and you’ve listened to the old Schnabel records as a boy. You’re a very talented fellow. Wasn’t it Mendelssohn who came back from an oratorio that was kept secret, and transcribed it all from memory, just from hearing it? You are the same kind of genius.”

“Thanks to your vitamins,” Walter said in a low voice, giving Stefan a wondering stare.

“No,” his brother said roughly. “You had the last of those six months ago. All they did was bring out the true Marek gift that is in your blood—and even mine, perhaps.”

“I often wondered why you never took such injections,” Walter said. “Your desire to play well was always greater than mine; we both know that.”

“I didn’t want them; I have my work,” Stefan said quickly. “I developed them especially for you, but now their part is done. You are the finest pianist in the world; everybody admits that. Your prowess has earned unlimited acclaim.”

During the years that followed, Walter consolidated his position as the best of the century. His specialty was Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” Sonata, a late and very difficult work of the composer. Walter played it much faster, and with more use of the pedal than other pianists, yet somehow kept the musical line under iron control so that the final impression was one of enormous excitement without the taint of eccentric phrasing.

Meanwhile Dr. Marek became more withdrawn and grim, spending long hours in the laboratory, and gradually giving up all teaching chores. Walter was too happy and creative now to fret about Stefan, but wondered occasionally, in a vague way, if his brother were ill. Certainly the man looked haggard and tormented, aged beyond his years.

Still, after all these omens, Walter was shocked when Stefan died suddenly at forty-nine; and yet there was a guilty feeling of release, as if a shadow had moved away from him to reveal the sunlight in full strength.

Dr. Marek’s colleagues, who honored the work, if not the man, wanted to publish his collected researches, and Walter, unwilling to have outsiders meddle with Stefan’s papers, decided to do the

basic screening himself. The notebooks were neatly shelved in chronological order, but two were oddly missing—the ones for the years of Walter's rebirth as a pianist. A careful search proved fruitless; either they were lost or had been destroyed.

There were, of course, some boxes of more personal papers, which cost Walter some pangs of memory: Stefan at eighteen, dark, handsome, self-reliant, and slightly grim, as circumstances in Hungary warranted; his parents, lost at six, he could not remember well, but his mother's face, full of vivacity and charm, made one old photo sparkle with life.

Then, in an envelope of clippings, Walter found some items that puzzled him greatly, since Stefan had no interest in crime. The one on top, dated sixteen years previously, was headed: "Gruesome Find on Skid Row." It came from the biggest town in the county, not far from their home. Walter scanned it wonderingly, then his attention sharpened. "The headless body of a derelict has turned out to be that of Zygmunt Jankowski, once called the greatest pianist in the world. After an accident in which his fingers were hopelessly mangled, he vanished, and was lost until now. Whether he was killed for a few coins, or was the victim

of thrill-seeking perverts who have preyed on skid row bums for some years now, is not known."

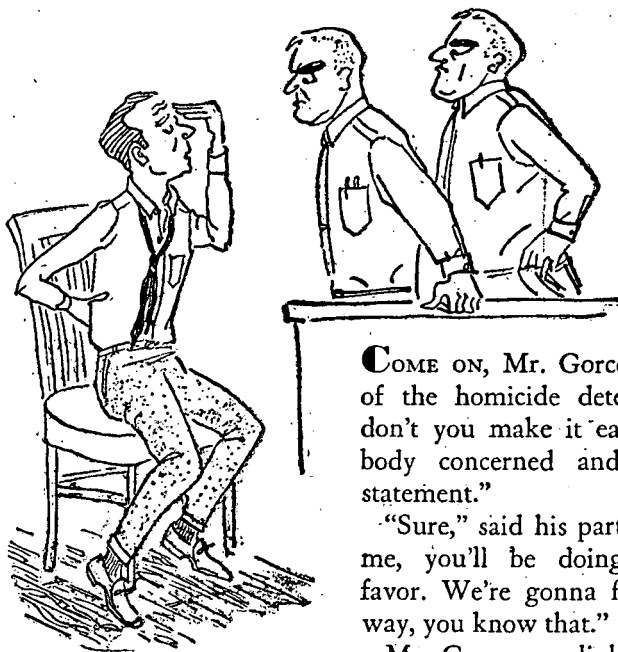
Walter read on. This was no ordinary man, but Jankowski, so tragically dead. "... married the beautiful French singer, Claudine Michaud, who committed suicide when he disappeared." Suddenly Walter felt a terrible pang at his heart. He saw a woman's face, hauntingly beautiful in its modeling, planes, and color; and a low, sweet voice, full of love and anguish called his name . . . *his* name? No; she sang, "Zygmunt, Zygmunt . . ." and the harsh Polish syllables were pure melody in his ears. He shook his head as if to clear it; this was surely a mental aberration.

Unwilling to probe further, Walter skimmed the other clippings. The murder was not solved; there was more biographical material on Jankowski, though. One sentence caught his eye. It read: "Jankowski was celebrated for his dazzling, unorthodox interpretation of the massive "Hammerklavier" Sonata of Beethoven. He played it extremely fast, sure of his flawless technique, but always with perfect control, so that there was no suggestion of mere caprice . . ." *How very odd*, Walter thought; *it might be a description of my own approach . . .*

Some people bear gifts; others bid fond "farewells".



Good-Bye MR. MADISON



COME ON, Mr. Gorcey," said one of the homicide detectives, "why don't you make it easy for everybody concerned and give us a statement."

"Sure," said his partner. "Believe me, you'll be doing yourself a favor. We're gonna find out anyway, you know that."

Mr. Gorcey, a slight, prim man in his late forties, smiled pleasantly and shook his head slowly in the

negative of a very positive man.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said, "but I really don't know what you are talking about."

One of the detectives turned red in the face and muttered under his breath. The other merely sighed heavily and rolled his eyes upward in exasperation.

"We're talking, Mr. Gorcey," the first detective said evenly, "about the same thing we've been talking about since last night at six o'clock. We're talking about Oscar Madison. What did you do with his body?"

Gorcey shrugged and yawned. "I told you. Mr. Madison said he

did take it. There's your case."

The detective leaned across the interrogation table and glared angrily at Mr. Gorcey.

"Well, maybe you can tell us just how he got out of the place that night without going past the watchman? Maybe you can explain why he left his car in the parking lot? Maybe you—"

"Please!" Mr. Gorcey interrupted in a sudden burst of impatience. "Please, officer, there's no need to raise your voice. I fail to see why I should be called upon to explain the actions of my employer. After all, I only worked for him, you know; I wasn't his keeper!"

It was Mr. Gorcey's turn to sigh heavily, and he did; heavily and dramatically. "Really, gentlemen," he continued, "I think I've been more than cooperative with you. It is now three o'clock in the afternoon and I've been here since six o'clock last evening. I've sat in this same disgustingly hard chair hour after hour, answering the same monotonous questions over and over again until I feel like a broken phonograph record. Now, gentlemen, my back is aching, my throat is sore, and I have an excruciating headache. I'm afraid I must insist that you allow me to call an attorney."

The red-faced detective drew back across the table, clenched his

by
Clark Howard


was going to take a trip. He didn't say where he was going or how long he intended to stay. He just left."

"Sure, sure," said the red-faced officer. "He just left—with sixty-two thousand dollars in cash. Just picked up the whole week's payroll and left."

"I don't know anything about that," Mr. Gorcey said quietly, "but if the money is gone, I guess he

fists, and slowly counted to ten. His partner sighed heavily again, almost as dramatically as their suspect had sighed, and shook his head slowly.

"Okay, Mr. Gorcey," he said wearily, "we'll go talk to the captain and see what he says. You wait here."

The two detectives left the room. Mr. Gorcey stretched his legs out in front of him and leaned his head back against the hard wood of the chair. He closed his eyes and smiled.

The captain's name was Fleece, and he was a humorless man who did not like jokes about that fact. He came into the interrogation room fifteen minutes later, followed by the two homicide detectives and a third, younger man whom Mr. Gorcey had not seen before.

"This is Mr. Miller of the district attorney's office," said Fleece. "He would like to hear your story firsthand, if you don't mind going over it again."

"What about my request to call a lawyer?" Gorcey wanted to know.

Captain Fleece smiled congenially but his eyes remained flat and cold. "If you'll cooperate just a little longer, Mr. Gorcey, and go over this thing once more for Mr. Miller's benefit, we'll let you call

anyone you want. Is it agreed?"

"All right," Mr. Gorcey said reluctantly. "One more time."

"Fine, fine," said Fleece. He sat down behind the interrogation table and opened a small notebook. "Now, let's see. Your name is Elmo Gorcey, you're a bachelor, age forty-eight, reside at the Crest Hotel, been living there about eight years. Is all that correct?"

"Correct," Mr. Gorcey confirmed. "You might also add that I am very well regarded by the management there and have an excellent reputation among the other guests. I'm quite sure you've found that out already, haven't you?"

Fleece cleared his throat and turned to the next page in his notebook. "You're employed as general manager for the Madison Meat Packing Company. How long have you been with that firm, Mr. Gorcey?"

"Thirty-two years. I started as a wrapper on the meat packing line when I was sixteen years old. Surely you've already obtained that information from the personnel files?"

Fleece blushed slightly and forced a smile. "All right, Mr. Gorcey, let's skip the preliminaries and get right down to business, then. Let's go back to Thursday afternoon. You were in the general

offices of the Madison Meat Packing Company, is that correct?"

"I was on the job as usual, yes."

"Was your employer, Mr. Oscar Madison, in his office?"

"Yes. He had been in conference all day, right through the lunch hour."

"In conference with who?"

"With *whom*," Mr. Gorcey corrected. "In conference with three bright young Ivy League types who flatteringly refer to themselves as efficiency experts."

"What was the purpose of their conference, do you know?"

"Yes. The company had been operating in the red for over three years. We had been forced to use the bulk of our cash reserves to offset losses over that period, and the firm was heavily mortgaged. Mr. Madison was convinced that our losses stemmed from inefficiency within the company. He hired these so-called efficiency experts about two months ago to look into the overall operation. The conference on Thursday was their final report to him."

Fleece sat back and clasped his hands behind his head. "From the tone of your voice, Mr. Gorcey, I take it that you didn't approve of his action."

"It wasn't my place to approve or disapprove decisions made by my employer," Gorcey replied,

measuring his words carefully. "I will admit, however, that in my own opinion the losses had nothing to do with the internal operation of the business, of which I had complete charge. I felt that they were the result of accelerated marketing on the part of our competitors. We are a very small company, and it has always been difficult for us to compete with the big Chicago plants. The demands of competition have merely increased in recent years. It was as simple as that. Mr. Madison, however, was of a different opinion, which is why he retained the management counseling firm that sent us their so-called experts."

"What was your attitude toward these efficiency experts?" asked Miller, the district attorney's man, speaking for the first time.

"They were a bunch of meddlers," Gorcey snorted. "Didn't know the first thing about the meat packing business. A hundred dollars a day they got, each one of them, and they did nothing but sit around with stopwatches in their hands and pry into things that didn't concern them. The two months they spent with us accomplished nothing except to put the company further into the red."

"Did you try to interfere with them in any way?" Fleece asked.

"No, of course not. It wasn't my

place to interfere with anyone."

"What time did this conference break up Thursday afternoon?" asked Miller.

"About three o'clock," Gorcey told him.

"What happened after the efficiency experts left?"

"Mr. Madison called me into his office."

"What did he want?"

"He—he called me in to fire me," Gorcey said thickly. His brow wrinkled and he stared down at the top of the interrogation table. "To fire me," he repeated softly, almost to himself. "After thirty-two years—"

"How did you react to that?" Fleece wanted to know.

"What?" Gorcey said dumbly, staring at the table.

Fleece and the others tensed, sensing that their suspect might be at the breaking point.

"How did you react?" Fleece repeated quietly. "How did you feel when he said you were fired, after thirty-two years of loyal service? What did you do?"

Mr. Gorcey blinked his eyes rapidly several times and looked around the room at all the faces watching him so intently. He quickly forced himself out of his momentary lethargy and regained his composure.

"I became very angry," he ad-

mitted frankly. "Mr. Madison and I had a heated argument. I'm sure you already know that. The other employees in the office probably heard the whole thing. Haven't you questioned them?"

Captain Fleece closed his eyes for a moment and drummed his thick fingers on the desk. "Never mind whether we've questioned them or not," he said tightly.

"Mr. Gorcey," Miller said, "perhaps we could get this over a lot more quickly if you would just tell us what *you* did, instead of trying to second guess what the police have done. Will you do that?"

"Of course," Gorcey replied petulantly, shrugging his shoulders. "I certainly didn't mean to upset anyone. I'm only trying to help."

Miller smiled weakly. Behind him he heard the two homicide detectives groan audibly. He picked up the notebook from in front of Fleece and took over the interrogation.

"How long did you and Mr. Madison argue?" he asked.

"About two hours."

"Were there other employees around the entire time?"

"No, of course not. Everyone else went home at four o'clock. Didn't they tell you that?" Mr. Gorcey noticed Captain Fleece grit

his teeth. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said at once. "I'm not supposed to second guess, am I?"

Miller smiled weakly again.

"All right, Mr. Gorcey. So you were alone with Mr. Madison for about an hour, right? Did you continue to argue?"

"Yes, for a while. Then we both calmed down and settled into a more rational discussion of the issues involved."

"What was the result of your discussion?"

"The result was that Mr. Madison apologized for acting so hastily. He said he was ashamed that he had allowed himself to be influenced by outsiders and told me I had a job with Madison Meats for as long as I wanted it. He even said he intended giving me a raise to make up for any embarrassment he might have caused me that afternoon."

"I see," Miller nodded. "What happened then?"

"Well, Mr. Madison said he was tired. Said he had been under a great deal of pressure from the banking people who hold the mortgage on the firm. It seems they were getting ready to foreclose. At any rate, Mr. Madison said he needed a rest, and wanted to go away for a few weeks. He said if he didn't show up at the office for a while, just to tell every-

one he was on a little vacation and not to worry."

"What did he do then?"

"Why, he just said good-bye and left."

"And what did you do?"

"I stayed there for an hour or so, finishing up some work I had to do. I left shortly after six, as the watchman probably told you. Oh, sorry."

"That's all right," said Miller. "As a matter of fact we have questioned the watchman, rather extensively. He does remember seeing your car leave the parking lot a little after six. But he was on duty until midnight and he didn't see Mr. Madison leave at all. How do you explain that?"

Gorcey shrugged. "It's not up to me to explain it," he said pointedly. "All I know is that Mr. Madison left the office a little after five."

"With sixty-two thousand dollars in payroll money?"

"I know nothing about that part of it," Mr. Gorcey stated emphatically. "The first I knew of the money being gone was the next morning after the paymaster opened the vault. That's when the police were called."

"So now," Miller said mockingly, "we have a missing payroll as well as a missing man. And it appears that both have simply disappeared into thin air."

"Yes, it does appear that way, doesn't it," Gorcey said agreeably.

"Now, look," Captain Fleece cut in suddenly, "you don't think we're going to swallow a story like that, do you? When those other employees left that office at four o'clock you and Oscar Madison were going at it hot and heavy about him firing you. We've got witnesses to prove that. And you left the plant a little after six o'clock. We've got a witness to that, too. Now, we've searched every inch of that plant and can't find Madison. We've checked every bus and train that left here Thursday night and all day Friday, and he wasn't on any of them. He didn't take his own car, because it was left on the parking lot, and he didn't rent a car or buy another one. Since four o'clock Thursday afternoon nobody has seen Oscar Madison or that sixty-two grand except you! Now, come on, Gorcey, where is he?"

"I don't know," Mr. Gorcey said aloofly.

"You killed him, didn't you?"

"No," said Mr. Gorcey.

"You killed him in a fit of rage about being fired, didn't you?"

"No," said Mr. Gorcey.

"You put his body in your car and drove away from the plant and buried it somewhere, didn't you?"

"No," said Mr. Gorcey. "I did not and I can prove it."

"You can *what*?" said Fleece, his mouth dropping open.

"I can prove you're wrong in what you just said," Mr. Gorcey repeated. Fleece started to say something but Miller raised a hand to silence him.

"How can you prove it, Mr. Gorcey?" Miller asked.

"Very easily. First of all, you know that I live at the Crest Hotel. It is a ten minute drive from the plant to the hotel. Now, at twenty past six on Thursday I pulled into Lucky's Service Station right across the street from the hotel and left my car there to be serviced. Then I went over to the hotel and into the dining room for supper. It was exactly six-thirty when Millie, the waitress, brought me a menu. I know that because she looked up at the wall clock and commented on my being exactly one hour late. You see, I normally order supper promptly at five-thirty. I'm sure she'll remember."

"What does that prove?" Fleece demanded, irritated.

"Please, Captain, contain yourself," Mr. Gorcey said. "Just let me finish. Now, I left my car at the service station all night. *All night*, gentlemen. I did not pick it up until about twenty minutes before eight the next morning. At that

time I drove directly to the plant and pulled onto the lot about five to eight. I was back at my desk at eight o'clock."

Mr. Gorcey sat back and folded his hands primly in his lap.

"Perhaps you can suggest when I possibly would have had time to dispose of Mr. Madison or any other body from the time I left the plant Thursday until I returned Friday morning? Why, the only possible thing I would have had time to do is merely dump the body out along the side of the road somewhere, and surely it would have been found by now had I done that. As for the time after I arrived for work Friday morning, of course, there's no question. There are witnesses to the fact that I was on the plant premises all day, up until the time you arrested me late Friday afternoon. No, Captain, I'm afraid your little theory is full of holes. *Large* holes, as a matter of fact."

Fleece fumed in angry silence. Miller rubbed his chin thoughtfully, staring at Elmo Gorcey for a long minute, then sighed and glanced at his watch. It was four-forty-five.

"I believe, gentlemen," Mr. Gorcey said pleasantly, "that the law allows you to hold a person on an open charge for only twenty-four hours, isn't that right? Does

that mean that at six o'clock this evening you will either have to charge me formally with murder or release me?"

"That's what it means, all right, Mr. Gorcey," Miller admitted, while Captain Fleece cursed under his breath again.

"Dear me," said Mr. Gorcey, "you only have a little more than an hour left. Perhaps I won't need a lawyer after all."

Captain Fleece stalked from the room, followed by his two thoroughly frustrated homicide detectives, who in turn were followed by Miller, the man from the district attorney's office, shaking his head dejectedly as he walked.

When they were gone, Mr. Gorcey stretched his legs out in front of him and leaned his head back against the hard wood of the chair. He closed his eyes and smiled to himself.

At five minutes to six they all returned, along with a uniformed sergeant.

"All right, Mr. Gorcey," said Miller, "you can go. We're releasing you."

"Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that," said Mr. Gorcey, smiling. "I could do with a shower and shave, not to mention a good night's sleep."

"I'm sure you could," replied Miller. "We want to thank you

for your cooperation, and we hope you realize that we held you no longer than the law allows."

"Of course, of course," said Mr. Gorcey, "I understand. If I can be of any further help to you, please don't hesitate to let me know. I'll be back on the job as usual Monday morning. You can reach me any time."

"Thank you, Mr. Gorcey, we appreciate it. If you'll just go with the sergeant here, he'll return your personal effects to you."

After Gorcey had left the room, the four officials sat down at the interrogation table to go over their evidence once again.

"I can't help feeling that we just let a murderer walk out of here," Captain Fleece said helplessly.

"I'd go along with you on that," said Miller, "except for one thing: the body. Just like Gorcey said, there's no possible way he could have disposed of Madisons' body. He either had to hide it at the plant or drop it on the road. He didn't have time to do anything else with it."

"Well, it's not on the road," Fleece said. "And as for the plant, I had twenty men cover every square inch of that place. They even went through the sewerage system and ventilating shafts. There's no body there."

"It's just possible, I suppose,"

Miller offered, "that Gorcey is telling the truth. That Madison *did* grab the money and beat it."

"You'll never get *me* to believe that," Fleece said. "Madison had over six thousand dollars in his bank account. He had cash and bonds worth another ten thousand in a safe deposit box. He had a closet full of two hundred dollar suits in his house, and that convertible he left on the parking lot is worth probably six or seven grand more. You'll never get me to believe that a guy about to skip out would leave all that behind when it would have been so easy to take with him. Besides, the watchman says Madison never left the premises, remember?"

"Maybe the watchman is lying. Maybe *he* knocked off Madison and grabbed the money."

Fleece stared thoughtfully at the scarred tabletop. He said nothing.

"Let's bring him in and see if he still tells the same story," Miller suggested. "At least we've got to *look* like we're earning our pay."

"Very funny," Fleece said sourly. He sighed and turned to the two detectives. "Pick up the watchman."

Elmo Gorcey was parked across the street and half a block down when the police car pulled up to the main gate of the Madison Meat

Packing Company. He saw the watchman lock the big gate and turn off the lights in the guard shack just outside the fence, then get into the car with the two detectives and drive away.

Fifteen minutes later, Gorcey got out of his car and walked down to the gate. He let himself in with his own key and walked quietly across the wide parking lot to the office building. Once inside, he went down the long corridor on the main floor, ignoring all the offices, and proceeded through a set of heavy double doors into the plant itself. He switched on the lights, knowing they could not be seen from outside the building.

Gorcey went directly to the huge freezer locker and entered, propping the door open behind him. From one of the shelves he removed four boxes about twice the size of an ordinary book. Each was labeled: MADISON'S FINE FRANKS. He checked them to make sure he had the right boxes. He did have. They all contained money. Frozen money, but still money—sixty-two thousand dollars;

not a bad pension after thirty-two years of loyal service.

He put the boxes in a bag and left the freezer, kicking the door shut behind him. On his way out he walked past the long line of processing machinery that had been so familiar to him over the years. *Last time I'll see all this*, he thought. He passed the salt bins where the meat was processed, the big slicer where it was cut into long strips, the crushing machine where it was mashed to a soft paste, and finally the stuffer, where into one end went the pulpy meat and out of the other end came fine stuffed frankfurters.

Pausing for a moment at the end of the stuffer, Gorcey looked down at a refrigerated bin stacked with packages of recently prepared franks. A sign hanging on the front of the bin was marked: THURSDAY, representing the day that those particular franks had been processed through the stuffer. Smiling, Mr. Gorcey reached down, gently patted the top package, and whispered, "Good-bye, Mr. Madison."



Words pay no debts, Shakespeare concisely noted.



FOLKS



THAT dumb deputy rammed the station wagon down the twisty mountain road like some hot-rod teen-ager, slewing gravel all over the hills and taking the tighter turns on two wheels. He slammed on the brakes just as we topped a rise, and we skidded to a stop alongside another county car and a whole string of state cruisers parked at the foot of a high, dun-colored hill. The handcuffs bit into my wrists as I tried to catch myself against the steel-mesh screen that separated the back seat from the front.

The siren growled itself to sleep

while I choked on the dust that swirled about the car. "Nice going, George," I said. "That was a great piece of driving."

"You just keep your mouth shut, red-neck." George pulled me from the back seat, hustling me over to where fat old Ward Beecher stood talking excitedly to a big, square-jawed trooper. "Here's your man, Sheriff. I had me a time getting him out of his cell, or I would have been here sooner."

Ward grabbed my arm and hauled me over in front of the state cop. "This is the guy I was telling you about. This here is Johnny Barnes."

The trooper looked me over slowly, irritation showing plainly on his face. His eyes were as flat and hard as the brim of his campaign hat. He stood with one hip thrust out, his hand resting on the butt of the big magnum that swung from a Sam Browne belt. I could tell he was a John Wayne fan, too.

"What are they holding you for, Barnes?" He looked at me as if I were something he'd scraped off his shoe.

"What the hell do you care?"

Ward nearly yanked off my arm. "He's in on a drunk and disorderly. He sopped up all the whiskey he could hold last night, and then made a shambles out of

the tavern. When some of these hill folks get a load on, they like to bust up things."

I pulled my arm from his grasp. "Why was I brought out here, Sheriff?"

"Starky Hibbs is a friend of yours, ain't he?" He pointed to a scrub oak nearly to the top of the mountain. "Well, that old fool is dug in up there with a brace of deer rifles and enough ammo to last the full hunting season. You're going to talk him down from there, or we'll let you watch us shoot him down."

I grinned. "You going to be the first one up that hill, Ward?"

"We'll go up, if we have to." The trooper's voice was as hard as his eyes. "We would rather do it the easy way, if possible."

"I imagine you would, buddy. What did Starky do, anyway?"

Ward shifted his chew to the other cheek. "He come home from the mines early last night, and caught Spicy with that salesman feller right in the house. He shot 'em both."

I had known Spicy a long time; I had gone to school with her. She was a pretty little thing, but she always had round heels. She never should have married an old man like Starky.

"Both shot in the head?" I asked.

The state man frowned. "How

did you happen to know of that?"

"I've seen that ol' feller shoot before."

"He's good?"

"He's plenty good," I said. "There's only one better in these parts. Me."

It was quiet, then. The wind whipped through the scattered trees, moaning like a grieving widow. The sun ball was just peeking over the rim of the hill.

Ward said, "You going to talk him down, Barnes? Old Starky might listen to you."

The trooper folded his arms across his chest and studied me closely. "How come you and this old man are such friends, kid?"

"That old man packed my daddy on his back for nearly seventy miles around the Bataan Peninsula to keep him from catching a Jap bayonet. I owe Starky; if I can help him, I want to do it."

Ward keyed the bracelets loose from my wrists. I stood there trying to rub the feeling back, when the state man handed me the bull horn.

"Not through that thing." I pushed it away. "I'll go up where I can see him."

"Forget it!" He wheeled away from me. "Put him back in the car, Sheriff!"

"Give him a chance!" Ward pleaded. "You don't understand

these hill folks. Hibbs won't listen to him from down here. Let him go up, maybe it will save some of us from getting killed."

"He's already killed twice, Sheriff." The trooper's hands were on his hips; his chin was thrust forward. "What makes you think he won't do it again?"

"That's my lookout," I said. "Let me go up to him."

He threw me a look of pure disgust and jerked his thumb toward the hill. "Go ahead, you dumb little hill-jack! If that old man blows your guts out, I'll laugh while you're rolling down that mountain! I've never seen such people in my life. Go on, MOVE!"

I started up the slope when he yelled again.

"Barnes! If you live long enough to talk to him, tell him to put away the rifle and come down with his hands in sight."

"No, I won't tell him. I'll ask him."

The climb was a tough one, but I was hill bred and made it up to the oak in minutes. I made it almost to the oak; I had to stop when I heard the safety click off Starky's weapon.

"That's about as far as you better come, boy." The old man was slim and straight as a ramrod. The last few years with Spicy had

put a lot more gray into his hair, and more lines in his face, but those big, work-worn hands held that heavy Springfield mighty steady.

"Hello, Starky."

He nodded. "I reckon they told you what I've done."

"Just now."

"You come to bring me down, son?" The muzzle of his rifle stayed centered on my belt buckle.

"Me?" I laughed. "I come to ask a favor." I looked over my shoulder at the line of cars with the flashing red lights. Cover was sparse between us; the old man had himself a good field of fire.

"I ain't in much of a position to grant no favors, but you go ahead and ask it."

"First off, I promised them fellers that I would ask you to give up those deer guns and come back down with me."

A jay scolded from the stunted pine below us. The wind whipped Starky's coattails against his sparse shanks. "Is that your favor?"

"No, but I had to say it."

"I'm getting tired of waiting,

Johnny Barnes. Say your piece and get on back down that hill."

"All I want is a chance to fire that new rifle of yours. You know how I've always been about guns."

He glanced at the neat little .308 leaning against the oak. "You're off in the head, boy." He shook his head slowly. "You'll never get off this mountain."

"My daddy would have never got off Bataan if it hadn't been for you. I owe you, Starky. You've got to let me pay you off. This will be the last chance I'll ever get."

The old man was still for a long, long moment. The barrel of the Springfield came down slowly, and he stepped aside for me to reach the other rifle.

"How come they let you come up here, Johnny? Ward Beecher knew that me and your daddy were friends."

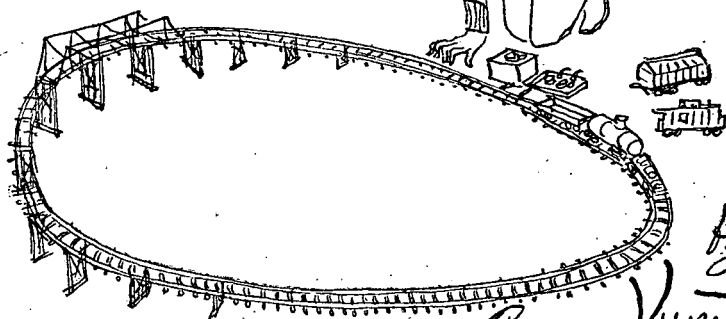
I jacked a cartridge into the chamber and bellied down behind the oak, searching through the scope for that square-jawed trooper.

"Them city fellers," I said, "they just don't understand hill folks."



It is not every question that deserves an answer—or that may be answered.

The Question on my mind



by
Lorenc Kunetka

FREDDY!" The voice was harsh.
"Yes, *mama*."

"Freddy, I've just come from the attorney's office where I lived through the most monstrous ordeal of my whole life. They read his will to me! When I married your father I never *imagined* he could be so grotesquely cruel!"

"Yes, *mama*."

"The imbecile left everything to you—the bank, the house in Lake Forest and the factory. I am to get some measly fifty thousand a year from stocks and the use of our condominium in the city. That is, until I remarry. Then I am out."

"Yes, *mama*."

This seemed to enrage her although I did not mean to enrage her. She drew herself up to her marvelous six feet, fixed me with an unnerving stare of white eyes and said in her most devastating stage voice (she used to be a famous Broadway star, you know), "Shut up and listen to me! I am not going to stand for this. I didn't waste my youth on him only to be kicked out now! He would not dare do this to me if he were alive!"

No, I did not mean to get her mad. She could be frightening. "Certainly not, *mama*."

"We must forget about this abominable document. I have hired Silverman to look after our business affairs and the lawyers will find a way out of this legal mess. You will sign what I ask you to sign and not stand in my way, Freddy!"

"Of course not, *mama*."

This obviously pleased her because she let me have her most radiant smile, reserved only for the dearest occasions. "I am enormously relieved, my darling Freddy, that we understand each other. You are a fabulously smart boy." She turned her splendid head to silent Mark Finnley, who sat on the sofa watching her perform. "We'll not have to get him committed after all," she said. "What a perfectly dreadful thought!"

We were in the library and the soft sun coming through a yellow curtain created a particularly good lighting effect; she knew well how to play to it, standing there in front of us.

Mark got up and put one of his huge hairy hands around her slim waist. "Don't let him upset you, Susanne, darling. I'll break his neck if he gets in our way."

Her radiant smile engulfed him. "No, he will not. He'll pout, he'll cry, he'll smash some of his furniture, but he is incapable of any action. Oh yes, he'll indulge in his hero complexes—but he really loves to feel important, on the verge of marvelous things. He is so *impractical*—so eminently suited to our purpose, you know. Without him the old buzzard would've gotten away with his cruel will."

Well, as a matter of fact they underestimated me. I threw some terrific fits and came out all right. True, I signed their legal papers, but not before they gave me the house, the servants and a new train with a miniature diesel engine. I let them have the apartment in the city, where they moved right after their honeymoon. Then I refused to call her *mama*. I started to address her as *Susanne, darling* even in front of Mark, not only in my darkened room before going to bed.

During my childhood, while living with my father, I had seen wives come and go—and the same must be true about husbands. At first Mark, *the beautiful leech*, seemed to have settled for a long run. How sickening to see them *happy*—except for what I knew! Mark and Kathryn, of course—yes, young and innocent Kathryn, Silverman's daughter.

A year after the marriage Mark started to deceive Susanne with Kathryn. Susanne is a star and he married her for the excitement of her temperament, the money and position we offered him—but he still looked for flighty amusement among the chorus lines, so to speak. I must admit he was quite clever about it at first, so that Susanne, blissfully unaware, enjoyed her happiness with him. It matured her more fully and enhanced her beauty to undreamed-of perfection.

Then when he decided to leave her, it brought on an unexpected complication: You can see that she had to be protected. It could have broken her to pieces.

They had been spending part of the summer with me on the estate, but now Mark was staying in the city. One evening when I tried to get my car from the garage, Susanne's car blocked the entrance and so I took the train. I could not bother her for the keys; she had

taken some sleeping pills at seven and gone to bed. She didn't feel well at all.

From the train station I walked; it was a pleasant summer night. When I got to the apartment building after midnight, Jack, the doorman, was gone and the building was locked up for the night. I had to let myself in. I did not take the elevator. Oh, perhaps some people would say I was afraid of the cage falling suddenly down, but just because this thought crossed their minds too, they ought not to say I had a phobia. I just never liked them, and that is final. I walked up.

I found Mark alone, watching television in the livingroom. He watched me, puzzled. "Where did you get the key, wart?"

I smiled. "While you were swimming one day I took a walk with your set to a locksmith, *Adonis!*"

"OK, little man, OK. And what big deed will *that* lead to?"

I was glad he treated me without a trace of respect. It was going to be easier and more important. "I am going to kill you, *beautiful!*"

He took it like a man. He got up to mix himself a drink at a bar in the corner of the room and, bending over the bottles and glasses, he asked without turning to me, "Why?"

The speech I had prepared and rehearsed so many times on my way

there did not come off with quite the effect I expected. "You are completely worthless, so nobody will miss you," I said. "My father hired you to look after his library, but I know what you did behind his back with Susanne. Then you were doing the same to Susanne with Kathryn. You don't care what Susanne means to me because you don't think I'll do anything about it. So I will."

He came to stand over me, huge, leering contemptuously. "Are you going to kick and scream with a foam around your mouth when I drop you in the elevator shaft?" He did not take me seriously. He was mocking and insulting. In fact, he was decidedly cruel.

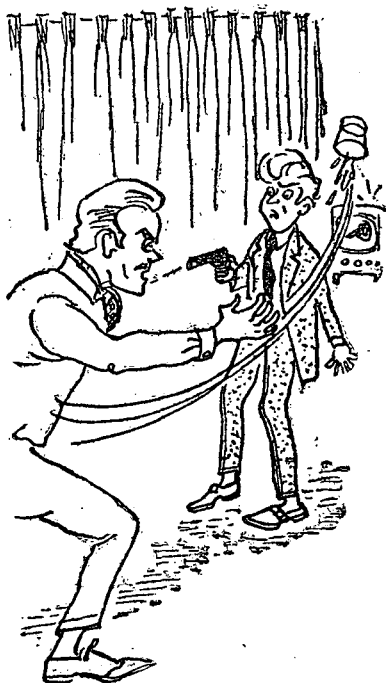
"You don't have to be *unpleasant* about it, Mark. I know Kathryn was here to visit you tonight, and I have seen her come before. You would have to break off with her before I'd reconsider my decision."

He tried to be condescending then, knowing perfectly well how I hate people who stoop to my level. He said in an oily voice, "Of course you are joking, Freddy. Look, Susanne and I have agreed to end our marriage. I love Kathryn and will marry her. It was only yesterday that everything was settled. So why don't you just pick up your marbles and run along like

a good boy and play your games?"

"Because I don't want to run along like a good boy. Because I hate your good luck with women. Because you will not stay with us and that will make Susanne miserable. Because I am sick and tired of everybody telling me what to do, treating me as if I didn't count."

I took out the gun and he knew. He tried to decide what to do now, looking at me while he backed off, his dark eyes growing to enormous proportions. "You are serious, you brat!"



He threw the glass at my head but missed. In a gigantic leap he flew at me. My hand trembled because I knew he was so vicious. I fired a shot and it did not stop him, so I fired another one and still another and suddenly a frantic fear came over me that I was not killing him. I was riveted to the thick carpets and kept firing in panic, wishing desperately he would go down. I could not remember how many times I fired the gun and still he hurtled toward me, until he was so close that I was able to touch him with the empty clicking gun. He reached after me but did not get me; he slid down right in front of my feet.

I felt tired then. He lay dead on the floor but there was something sinister about his crumpled body. I sank into the nearest chair.

I sat there waiting. The neighbors, the elevator operator, somebody must have heard the shots, and I expected people to rush in, swarm all over the place to witness, and take me away. In the anticipation of future developments I became pleasantly excited. Now it was over I did not fear the consequences. *Let all know I did what I decided to do!*

It was a sensation I had never experienced before, could only describe as peace of mind. In one bold energetic move I had become

somebody—a person. A *murderer*.

There are some who might shudder at the thought of murder as a means to self-acceptance. They may ask, "Didn't he have horrible pangs of conscience?" I must stress emphatically that the question of conscience did not enter the case. It is more important to me to know I have the courage to do what I feel like doing, always, regardless of consequences. In my mind I murdered many times before. When a woman would not take notice of me I would sometimes imagine her surprise should I stab her; when some self-important bully stood in my way, I would figure ways of permanently removing him; or when some egomaniac refused to recognize my importance, I would think of his fear and self-blame if I were to meet him alone with a gun.

Once before I only sampled the sensation of this satisfaction. Last year on my vacation in Florida, I stoned a cat that had made my life miserable by meowing on the windowsill, or sneaking at night into my room through the open window and licking my face—while I was *asleep*, mind you. I threw the lifeless body into the sea. Since then I knew it was only a question of time before I would do it again.

Since I did not plan any trickery to elude responsibility for my extraordinary deed, I felt it to be

above a question of my conscience.

I waited. I swear I do not know how long I sat there in the chair staring at the door, wishing the knob would turn and people would rush in and find me there.

Slowly I came to realize the absurdity of my situation. Nobody had heard the gunfire. The television was still on and (the irony of it!) the stupid face of a movie detective looked at me.

I stepped over the body and turned off the television set. A deafening silence. What now? Call the police? I tried to think it out. Lift the receiver. Dial. Say—what? *"Hello, Headquarters? Connect me with homicide, please, quickly. A ghastly accident happened."* I tried my voice, but a peculiar dryness did not let a peep out.

That, more than anything, infuriated me. Here I was in this fabulous situation and I had lost my voice! I fetched a glass of brandy and, although I never drink, drowned my humiliation. Instantly I became stubborn. *Let them find me, let the whole police force look for me and find me! I will not make it easier for them.*

I put on gloves and wiped the gun clean of fingerprints; did the same with the brandy glass and the doorknob. As I started to put Mark's fingerprints on the gun, his wedding ring slipped off and

rolled under a sofa; by the time I found it and tried it on my finger, I knew the folly of what I was about to do. He couldn't have committed suicide with so many bullets in his body! In disgust I threw the gun on the cocktail table. Instead of a hero, I almost made a jackass of myself.

I poured myself another drink, after which my disposition settled. I went to the bathroom, took off the gloves, washed my face in cold water and combed my hair. I returned to the livingroom refreshed, and seated myself opposite a wall mirror. This was how I wanted them to find me—feeling good, looking my nonchalant best, waiting for them leisurely, with a smile on my face and a drink in my hand.

It was a rather flattering thought, but I never realized it because the alcohol took its due and I fell asleep.

I had an awful dream. When I woke up it was still night. I was sick from the drinks. I was sick of the whole mess and not so sure why I was in this nightmarish situation. The room started to close in on me and you may as well know that to find oneself awakened suddenly in a dark room with a body in it is quite unpleasant.

I caught an early morning train and got home before the servants

woke, but Susanne's car was gone and she was not in her room. So I could not tell her what I did for her.

I took a shower and slept until noon in the clean white sheets of my very own bed.

That afternoon it was in all the papers; I decided to stay in bed to read about it. It seems that I had put into motion quite an apparatus: policemen, coroners, pathologists, detectives and crime lab technicians, along with various reporters because newspapers are the only ones who, besides the murderer, really thrive on this sort of thing. But there was not one word about me.

Susanne was in Chicago for a few days. She had called while I was asleep and told the servants she was staying in the city for the funeral.

In the evening I watched some of the activity on television. It made item one on the radio throughout the night. The secret knowledge that it was about me, and that I alone knew, was an absolutely delightful experience. I would describe it, except I really do not care to share it.

In the morning a mid-air collision of two airliners over San Francisco in which 237 people died pushed my crime off the front pages. You would not believe how

fleeting, how short-lived fame is!

I shaved and dressed very carefully. I sat down and wrote a letter to the *Chicago Tribune*:

Gentlemen: For reasons of my own I killed Mark Finnley. I should like to give you my story exclusively provided: (A) All pictures taken will be approved by me, (B) no text will be published without my express consent, (C) it will be front page lead story in your publication for two consecutive days. I will come to your office to discuss the layouts and other conditions tomorrow.

I posted the letter shortly before lunch and started to make plans.

The next day I went to the *Tribune*. All tall buildings have the same irksome feature in common; one can walk down the steps and out, but the one-way door will not open from the outside. It has been an endless source of irritation to me and I knew at once what to do in the *Tribune* building. I walked resolutely to the elevator starter. I asked him in no uncertain language to open the door for me. Then I walked up twenty-three stories to the *City Room*, where I arrived understandably out of breath.

Mr. Bublick, the reporter assigned to talk to me and take notes, sat across a rather cluttered desk

by an old typewriter, chewing a cigar without smoking it. It was a depressing room to work in; huge, with hundreds of desks and typewriters and phones constantly keeping some quite uncivilized-looking men on the go. Big clocks ruled the confusion; clocks hanging on walls everywhere.

"OK. So you don't take elevators," the small-eyed, chubby-cheeked Mr. Bublick said. "You walked up here."

"Yes. I came to discuss Mark Finnley. I killed him three days ago."

"I have your letter somewhere. Now then, why?"

"He was married to my step-mother and was leaving her. She never believed I was worth noticing. She didn't think I would protect her. I simply had to prove myself to her."

"Sure, that's an OK reason! Nevertheless, what about the cops? How come they're letting you run around?"

"Obviously, they don't yet know that I did it. After we have made satisfactory arrangements as to my story, I'll go and give myself up to the police."

"OK, Mac. Now then, what's your name?"

I felt a distinct dislike for this man creeping up on me. No respect whatsoever. While I was con-

templating whether or not to deal with him, a skinny man at the next desk got off the phone and started to put his coat on. "Let's go, Bublick. The cops have cracked the Finnley murder case."

Mr. Bublick turned slowly from me to him. "But this gentleman here walked up twenty-three flights of marble steps to describe to us in detail how it was he who killed Mark Finnley. OK? Now then, we can have his story exclusive!"

The skinny rail of a man did not even look at me. "Go to hell, Bublick, stop kidding around. The city is full of crackpots. They all want their name in the papers. In the meantime, the real story is getting stale at headquarters. Let's go!"

Believe it or not, they went.

I was going to sulk in the chair, except just then I overheard one of the reporters call to the city editor, "Hey, Charlie, it was his wife that killed Mark Finnley. They've just booked her."

The tired looking Charlie with a harried face called back, his voice without a trace of interest: "So what else is new?"

At the new precinct station I noticed the building was already foul smelling. I believe it is the drunken people and the perspiring suspects that frequent these places who contaminate them with their low odors. The hallway-type room with a

high bar was full of policemen who moved around in the slowest possible way. On the other side of the bar was the desk sergeant who didn't waste a motion in what he was doing, which was nothing, when I told him, "I came to confess to the murder of Mark Finnley."

In the same monotone he must have used in talking to humble drunks and traffic violators, he said, "Detective Division; homicide, around the corner, room 103." Really. Nothing ever impresses these desk sergeants!

A shirtsleeved detective sat in a white-walled room behind a bare desk eating a plain hamburger. His tie was knotted too tight—and too many times before—but his gun shone in a brand new black leather holster under his arm. At first he let me stand there in front of him as he ate his greasy food and drank his awful coffee from a leaking paper cup. Then he said, with his mouth still full, "What can I do for you, buddy?"

"You can listen to me. I want to confess the murder of Mark Finnley." While I told him why and how I did it, in great detail, he listened, eating his food without a pause. When I finished, he picked up the phone: "Hello, Captain? I have a guy here who claims it wasn't the broad that knocked off

her husband. It was he. What? Yes, I'll bring him over." Then to me, "Let's go see the captain, buddy."

The captain's office was larger and he was a short, stubby man—without his enormous girth he was almost as little as I. He asked me to sit down, and sent a uniformed policeman for some cola. When he reached in his pocket to give him money, his tightly packed bills were as thick as his fist. His other trouser pocket was—also bulging with cash.

"O.K. Finnegan, make it snappy. I don't have much time."

When the detective repeated what I had told him, the captain thought for a while. Then, "It's possible. Did you tell him about his constitutional rights? Does he have an attorney?"

The detective's chin dropped and his face became first white, then transparent. It looked like the blood it drained flowed up into the captain's face, now flaming red.

"Finnegan, you never learn! I'll have you back in uniform, giving out parking tickets!"

I was puzzled, of course.

The captain turned to me, trying to control his anger. "We cannot, sir, use your confession. It was not made according to the rules. Do you have a lawyer?"

"What do you mean? You don't believe me? I don't want my law-

yer here. I don't like him," I said.

"A confession made without a suspect first being advised about his constitutional rights, including the right of counsel, will be thrown out of court. It cannot be used in evidence. So you see, it doesn't matter whether or not we believe you."

"But I did it! I told you the truth! I'll stick by it! What about justice?"

"Justice is now predominantly a search for mistakes the police made in their investigation, because they can always free the suspect. Then he'll be protected by the double jeopardy provision. We are allowed to collect evidence only in a manner clearly prescribed by the courts. You could have killed Finnley and gotten away with it; but if we violate the rules by which you can be convicted, we will not get away with it."

"But what about the facts? Susanne is innocent and I am guilty!"

"As a matter of a practical cop's life, rules are everything. What was legally collected and can be presented in evidence, is fact. The rest is police brutality. We have to have your lawyer present. Otherwise you can change your mind, and any defense attorney straight out of college can free you and crucify us!"

So you see I had to let them call

Kratzer. He arrived sweaty and puffy. Every time I see him he looks more like a toad. He fixed me with a stare through the thick lenses of his glasses that made his bulging eyes enormous and said, "I hope you did not answer any questions, Freddy."

"They did not ask me any questions. I want to tell them how I killed Mark Finnley."

"You will do no such thing!" He shouted in front of all those people. "I advise you to shut up, damn it, and let me handle this matter!"

It was the first time I heard Kratzer use crude language. He was truly upset.

What followed was pretty boring. Kratzer asked the police captain what evidence he had on me; he said none. He asked him if I was charged; he said no. He asked can we leave, and the captain said yes. I swear he seemed relieved when Kratzer took me out; I bet he went to the washroom and counted his money after we left. That was the captain's kind of pleasure. Complications of my sort cluttered his book of regulations and he could live without them.

In Kratzer's air-conditioned office I sank into one of his deep chairs and sulked in silence, a complete failure. I knew what was coming. I knew the lecture by heart: "Freddy, you must grow up now.

Your penchant for attention caused us all a great deal of anxiety. Your father indulged you, but now you are on your own and must face the responsibilities of life. We are quite involved with Susanne's defense and you are not making our task easier. I should ask you what this is about, but I have talked at length to Dr. Sheffenhaus only an hour ago and he assures me that your medical history strongly suggests you are incapable of any independent decision or action. All this seems to be a crude attempt at drawing attention, just like many of your fits of temper. This unfortunate trait in your character already compelled us to agree to the arrangement suggested to us last year after your father's death, when Silverman was hired to look after the business, and Susanne was kept in the picture because she alone seemed to be able to handle you."

I stayed slumped in the chair, thinking. *When things quiet down, I will get even with the pompous frog.* After a while I got up, saying, "I want to go home to play with my train. And that is final."

I bought all the afternoon papers and read the incredible stories on the train. The turn of events defied imagination.

Here was innocent Susanne who was accused of murder on legally

gathered evidence and here was guilty I who will not even be questioned on legal grounds. The police had to make a choice based on their facts, not my confession. Truth played no role in their children's game of rules and regulations that put procedure above all else. The only thing they wanted was evidence that will stand up in a court where they play their little game of law. Susanne had a compelling reason to kill Mark Finnley because he was leaving her for a younger woman. They found her fingerprints on the murder weapon, a gun which belonged to her former husband. She was seen leaving the scene of the crime in hysterics, and was it not a fact that only a jilted woman in a jealous rage will empty a gun into the object of her lost affection? Besides, there was the question of the ring, the only valuable thing missing. Who but Susanne, who was known to be a possessive woman of violent temperament, would have taken the ring and left other valuables intact? The building was locked after midnight and she had the key to the building and to the apartment. Motive, means and physical presence. The police indeed had their evidence, the district attorney his case, and the courts their play of justice. Who was I to confuse them with truth?

As I reconstructed it, Susanne went for whatever reason to see Mark in the early morning, found him dead, handled the gun in her confusion and fled in panic, seen by Jack, the doorman who just came on duty.

When I arrived home, instead of playing with my train I took the miniature diesel engine apart and put it together again.

Next day I went to see Susanne. The grim, gray prison building depressed me, and gusts of wind blew dirty rain in my face as I walked from my car across the railroad tracks. All of it put me in a bad mood.

What depressed me even more was the change in elegant Susanne. The self-possessed, beautiful woman was only a memory.

Her voice, too, was lifeless. "Freddy, darling, how marvelous to see you! Please don't mind how I look—it's positively ghastly here!"

"Well, I do mind how you look. You are letting yourself go, *Susanne, darling*. It comes as a great shock to me to see you without possession of yourself."

"I just don't have the stamina anymore. Things are going frightfully bad. It is decidedly discouraging."

I almost screamed at her. "You cannot do this to me!"

She looked at me with faint

amusement. "May I ask why not?"

"You must not let anything take you apart! How else can I admire you, let you tell me what to do, sacrifice myself for you? I killed him to prove myself worthy of you! Now you want to let me down!"

She laughed with a bit of hysteria in her voice. "*You* killed him?"

"Yes, I did."

"Freddy, you insufferable brat, even if it were true, who in the whole world would ever believe you? Don't torture me! Go away!"

Kratzer failed and the jury found Susanne guilty. I am the only one left who could save her. I have the duplicate key to the apartment house and Mark's wedding ring inside my diesel locomotive. While I watch the miniature train go around and around the track I cannot escape my thoughts. *Shall I take them to the police? Shall I tell them what Chinese silk robe Mark was wearing on the night he died?*

It would make fools of their little game of justice, their silly little rules according to which it can be played. In one bold move I could free Susanne, condemn myself and become a hero. But there is this question now on my mind, growing in importance, intriguing me. *Why should I?*

It should be absolutely clear, especially to Teddy, that before taking "three steps" one must always ask, "May I?"



IT WAS bad tonight," she said with her own peculiar lopsided grin. She paced restlessly in front of the windows, the negligee swirling around her legs; the glass of Scotch and ice was held tightly in her right hand. Turning, she saluted with the glass the giant teddy bear that sat solemnly regarding her from the couch. He had been a

present from her father, a kind of joke, and was even named "Teddy" in her father's honor.

"Saved by the booze again," she said, and she saw him in the shadows across the street. It was nearly the same time every night. Closing

her eyes, she let the music move into her body, and seemed to feel, rather than hear, his steps on the fire escape. Her legs were suddenly free of cloth as she whirled, and she almost laughed.

She danced for him, and for herself, as she had so many times for her father long ago.

The silence came and then the clicking sounds from the phonograph as another record slapped down, a smoothly intricate Brahms. She dropped into the big chair by the window and propped her feet upon the sill.

It was over then, again—and nothing was over. He would leave now if indeed he had ever been there, and she had been brave in a cowardly way. She was tasting the cool bite of the whiskey on her tongue and scowling at her bare feet when the knock came, accompanied by a low whiny voice.

"Open the door. I must talk to you."

She turned fiercely. How dare he!

"You know I'm here, we must talk . . . please."

"Go away," she said with cool, contemptuous strength.

"No, I won't go away, not this time. We must understand this."

Ostentatiously she lifted the telephone receiver and dialed.

"You won't call the police. I

know you, baby." He rattled the knob.

Slowly she replaced the receiver. Her anger came solidly without uncertainty or fear. She opened the drawer of the coffee table, picked out the small blue-black automatic, and took dead aim on the keyhole. Everything narrowed down as if she were on the brink of solution.

"Look!" she commanded. "Be sure and look now."

She held the gun with both hands, left hand under the butt, as her father had shown her. She knew she could come very close to the keyhole, but perhaps a little higher and to the right would catch him in the forehead. She flipped the safety off and took up the slack in the trigger.

This time the sounds on the fire escape were not quiet. She wondered for a moment if he had fallen. But no, he was across the street and as she stared back at him, he threw her a gesture of schoolboy obscenity and ran up the alley. With rare exhilaration she crossed to Teddy and tumbled him to the floor with a swipe of her open hand.

In the morning she woke pleasantly to music from the clock-radio. Still, she knew it was there waiting; it would spring upon her at any moment. She turned her mind to the texture of the table-

cloth, the soft morning-yellow of the kitchen walls. At seven-thirty the music changed to news, the bland assured voice of a man telling the world of men about the world of men. She was combing her hair at the time, and quite suddenly her hair, her body held no charm for her. Lifelessly she finished up her face, accompanied by the vacant thudding of her heart.

"Oh Carol, would you step in here a moment?"

She finished the line she was typing. He was the junior partner, good-looking, offensively sure of himself, and married.

"About this letter to the Owens people . . ." He glanced up at her. "If you'll just step around here, so I can show you."

She tapped around to his side of the desk and bent to read over his shoulder. His arm pressed lightly against her thigh; slowly the pressure increased as he talked. At last he stood up and moved away from the desk, his hands touching her waist as if to keep his balance. Hurriedly she gathered up the papers and turned to go, but he was there blocking her way with a waxy smile.

"You're quite a girl, yes sircce, qwa-ite a girl."

He was a big man with large well-kept hands. The hands

cupped her shoulders, and meeting no resistance they pulled her in against him, slid down her back and locked. Yet there was no anger in her, no desire, only confusion, prickly and nauseous.

"Mr. Rawlins, please. Please, no," she said, hating herself for the soft quaver in her voice. She caught the knowing, triumphant smile on his face as he released her. She backed away, her face blank. Should she say something? But what?

His eyes were on her as she typed—a whole extra word, too much to erase. She turned the paper carefully out of the typewriter and laid it on the desk. Would not another girl have ripped it out and thrown it crumpled into the wastebasket? At last she forgot about him and the morning moved on.

At eleven-thirty he came by her desk. "Come to lunch with me," he said, staring past her toward Mr. Harriss' paneled door. His voice was casual, half-commanding, as if there were no possibility of her refusing.

She pressed down the lever marked "H": "May I go to lunch now?"

"Is Rawlins in his office?"

"He's just left," she said, flushing at the unplanned lie.

"Very well, go ahead."

"How did you happen to become

an attorney?" she asked in the middle of her first martini.

"Oh, I don't know. My father was an attorney; one must be something."

"My father is a writer, for television, and I'm a secretary."

"You're a woman," he said easily. "You don't have to be anything besides."

"Maybe I'm not a woman, so I have to be something."

"All right," he said, putting his hand over hers. "You're a girl who will be a woman. A very desirable girl who will be a woman."

"How will I do that?"

"Just relax, baby. Just relax and you can't miss. It's right there in the genes."

She found herself liking him immensely, the funny way his eyes crinkled when he smiled at her, his solid masculine assurance. She watched him eat, alternately repelled and fascinated. He was not at all like her father. When they were ready to leave, he held the collar of her coat as she shrugged into it, and then his hand went smoothly through her hair and clasped the back of her neck.

"I'm staying in town tonight," he said. "I'll be over to see you about nine."

"Perhaps I won't let you in," she said raggedly.

"Perhaps," he said with a grin.

Walking back to the office beside him, she was warmly aware of his body, the sheer bulk of it. She wanted to take his arm; instead she asked him if he were happily married.

"Huh," he said. "I've been married fifteen years."

That evening after work she stopped for a while in a small park near her apartment. There was the rushing sound of traffic from the expressway, distant and yet pervasive, as if the city existed differently beyond the small circle of her vision. The sky was a high red swirling, reflecting down the last rays of the setting sun. Familiar buildings stood too-clear in the uncommon light. An older man with an interesting kindly face sat down on a bench opposite hers. She thought to catch his eye and talk for a moment, but he stared ahead into his paper until she looked away. Then she felt his eyes sweep furtively up her legs. Casually she tucked her skirt closer and his eyes went back to the paper and stayed.

Her apartment was clean and hostilely silent, but soon he would be there. Teddy lay face down on the floor as she had left him the night before. She hugged him briefly and sat him up on the bed where he could watch her as she changed and bathed.

"Why am I letting him come

here?" she asked. "Tell me that."

Teddy sat on, solemnly.

"It doesn't matter, you mean. No, I suppose it doesn't. But couldn't it be bad, I mean really bad? He didn't invite me to dinner. Of course he did take me to lunch. What do you suppose he's doing until nine o'clock? Anyway he's very nice. Brash, but that's just his way."

She took Teddy with her to the kitchen when the frozen turkey dinner was ready.

"I do have a very desirable body, you know," she went on. "Oh well, let's have some music."

At nine-fifteen she had her first drink; by nine-forty-five, when her buzzer sounded, she was almost asleep. The music had blended into a kind of dream, something about a long silvery rod, sparkling along its whole extent in some mysterious connection with the music. She wondered if she could tell him about the dream, if he would see it as beautiful.

He was smelling of whiskey and smiling heavily.

"What would you like to hear, Rachmaninoff, Bartok . . ."

He gathered her up against him. She struggled, but realized her struggling was only increasing his desire.

"Later," she said in a small voice. "Please later, not now."

The room seemed full of him, the smell of his skin, the feel of his beard against her face. She gave up. Later they would talk, and look out the window together. There would be music and calm friendliness—but later.

He seemed restless and distracted. "What do you call him?" he asked, picking up the teddy bear.

"Teddy. Sit down, I'll make some coffee, or would you prefer Scotch?" She was at the record player, had decided on Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto.

"Carol, really, I must go. My wife will be wondering."

"Oh. I thought . . ."

He threw her a condescending smile, "Thanks, but no. I'll see you at the office tomorrow."

She stood with her cheek against the door, listening to his tramping steps on the stairs. *Something is happening, something . . .*

In the silverware drawer she found the big screwdriver she had bought two weeks before. Calmly, as from a plan long contemplated, she went to work on the chain lock on the fire escape door, yanking it loose with the screws barely in place. She dressed in the pale blue negligee, fixed herself a large drink, and sat down on the windowsill to wait. She did not think

—this once to be free, clean, powerful. The clouds were gray and swiftly moving, the Rachmaninoff went smoothly on—and then he was there across the street in the alley, looking up at her. For a moment she wavered, and then her heart contracted at the sound of his feet on the fire escape. The trailing edge of her negligee carressed the window as she whirled lightly on the balls of her feet, her arms extended above her head. The music beat into her like a huge heart, pounding, destroying consciousness, consequences. She was as a little girl again.

Hips rocking, eyes closed, she faced the door, and finally heard the sharp crack of the lock falling away. He was a big man, moving into the room, his face tight, grotesque. Without thought or fumbling, she whirled to the drawer by the chair. He was very close when she turned with the automatic—the sound was deafening. He fell across the chair and onto the floor, his eyes fluttering with helplessness, and in the quietness afterwards the Rachmaninoff went smoothly on.

Later, when the police arrived, she was in her bedroom in bed, her Teddy warm by her side.

"I killed him," she said when the policeman opened the bedroom door.

"Are you all right, Miss?" the man asked. He, too, was a big man.

"I killed him!" she screamed at the man. "I killed, killed, killed!"

In the morning she awoke in a strange bed, and there were trees and grass outside her window. Strangely, her Teddy was there too. She threw him out on the floor in disgust—what, after all, did they think? A nurse brought her clothes and suggested that she come down the hall to breakfast. She ate alone, calmly. Soon she would see a doctor and they would do with her as they saw fit. It was, after all, out of her hands.

She was happy that day, walking on the grounds, speaking casually to several people, watching television after supper in the lounge. The next morning after breakfast she saw a Dr. Collins, a heavysset, older man with graying hair and large, well-kept, very masculine hands.

He listened to her patiently for a while and then interrupted with a wave of his hand: "There are several things you should know. For one thing, the man that, ah, broke into your apartment has been identified by several other women in your neighborhood who had similar experiences. In fact he had a prison history for just the kind of misconduct that—resulted in his demise.

"The police who came to your apartment were, in fact, on a stake-out only a half-block away. So you see there can be no question of legal action against you. You'd best try to forget it, an unfortunate experience."

She tried to explain, but she felt his eyes on her exposed knee caps, she felt them entering his eyes, his blood. She tried to tell him about why it had happened, but her voice faltered, her strength left her.

"I see," he said comfortably. "Well, it is quite possible that this experience may have, shall we say, accentuated, or brought to the surface an unhealthy way of thinking. Perhaps you should engage professional help."

There was silence in the office.

"You will be released when you leave this office," he said.

"Do you have private patients?"

"As a matter of fact, we got in touch with your father. He agreed to assume any financial obligations, should we decide on such a course. Shall we say two hours a week, we'll see how that works. Shall we?"

He stood up then and with his warm, damp hand on her arm, escorted her to the door.

"Please arrange the hours with my secretary. Until next time, then."

After the appointment had been made, she stood looking down at the woman, the secretary, seeing the careful, confident female-alien that sat back, deep behind her eyes.

"Yes," said the secretary. "Is there something more I can do for you?"

She walked quickly away without answering.

There was a note on her door: HOPE YOU ARE FEELING BETTER. I'LL DROP BY TONIGHT ABOUT TEN. GEORGE RAWLINS

She smiled. The automatic was in its place in the drawer. She took Teddy out of the wrapping paper they had given her at the hospital and sat him on the couch. This time Teddy would see. This time it would be made absolutely clear. She would let him take three steps into the room and the Rachmaninoff would be playing . . .



In the realm of justice, man's identity is not constituted solely in his fingertips.

COLLY BABCOCK was shot to death on the night of September 9, in an alley between Twenty-Ninth and Valley Streets in the Glen Park District of San Francisco. Two police officers, cruising, spotted him



by
Bill Pronzini

Sometimes
there is
JUSTICE

coming out the rear door of Budget Liquors there, carrying a metal box. Colly ran when he saw them. The officers gave chase, calling out for him to halt, but he just kept running. One of the officers fired a warning shot, but when Colly didn't heed it, the officer pulled up and fired again. He was aiming low, trying for the legs, but in the half-light of the alley it was a blind shot. The bullet hit Colly in the small of the back and killed him instantly.

SOMETIMES THERE IS JUSTICE

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I read about it the following morning over coffee and undercooked eggs in a cafeteria on Taylor Street, a block and a half from my office. The story was on an in-

side page, concise and dispassionate; that kind of objective writing is taught in journalism classes, just the cold facts. A man dies, but he's nothing more than a statistic, a

name in black type, a faceless non-entity to be considered, then forgotten, along with your breakfast coffee . . . unless you knew him; unless he was your friend.

Very carefully, I folded the newspaper and put it in my coat pocket. Then I stood from the table and made my way through the crowd of fine young men in dark business suits and neatly-tacked ties, and the girls in tight, warm wool dresses and short, belted coats. I went out to the street.

The air smelled of pollution. The wind was up, blowing in off the Bay, and rubble swirled and eddied in the gutters. It would rain soon, but the cleansing would be short-lived, ineffectual.

I walked into the face of the wind, toward my office.

"How's the job, Colly?"

"Oh, fine, just fine."

"No problems?"

"No, no, none at all."

"Stick with it, Colly."

"I'm a new man."

"Straight all the way?"

"Straight all the way."

Inside the lobby of my building, it was cold and dark and still. There was an Out of Order sign taped to the closed elevator doors. I went around to the stairs and up them to the second floor and along the hallway to my office. The door was unlocked. I opened it and

stepped inside, and saw her there.

Colly Babcock's widow sat in the chair before my desk.

Quietly, I closed the door. Our eyes met and held for several seconds. Then I crossed the room and sat down, facing her.

She said, "The superintendent let me in."

"It's all right."

Her hands were clasped tightly in the lap of her plain black dress. "You heard?"

"Yes," I said. "What can I say, Lucille?"

"You were Colly's friend," she said. "You helped him."

"Maybe I didn't help him enough."

"He didn't do it," Lucille said. "He didn't steal that money. He didn't do all those robberies like they're saying."

"Lucille . . ."

"Colly and I were married thirty-one years," Lucille said. "Don't you think I would have known?"

I said nothing.

"I always knew," she said.

I sat looking at her. She was a big woman, big and handsome; a strong woman. There was strength in the line of her mouth, and in her eyes, round and gray, tinged with red now from the crying. She had stuck by Colly Babcock through two prison terms, and twenty-odd years of running and

hiding, and of looking over her shoulder. *Yes, she would always have known.*

I said, "The papers said Colly was coming out the back door of the liquor store, carrying a metal box. They found a hundred and six dollars in the box, and the door jimmied open."

"I know what the papers said, and I know what the police are saying. But they're wrong. Wrong."

"He was there, Lucille."

"I know that," she said. "Colly liked to walk in the evenings. A long walk, then a drink when he came home. It helped him to relax. That was how he came to be there."

I shifted position on my chair, not speaking.

Lucille said, "Colly was always nervous when he was doing jobs. That was one of the ways I could tell. He'd get irritable, and he couldn't sleep."

"He wasn't like that lately?"

"You saw him a few weeks ago," Lucille said. "Did he appear that way to you?"

"No," I said, "he didn't."

"We were happy," Lucille said. "No more running, and no more waiting. We were truly happy."

My mouth felt dry. "What about his job?"

"They gave Colly a raise last week. A fifteen dollar raise. We

went to dinner to celebrate, a fine restaurant on the Wharf."

"You were getting along all right on the money," I said. "Nothing came up?"

"Nothing at all," Lucille said. "We even had a little bank account started." She bit her lip. "We were going to the West Indies someday. Colly always wanted to retire to the West Indies."

I looked at my hands. They seemed big and awkward resting on the desk top. I put them in my lap. "These Glen Park robberies started a month and a half ago," I said. "The police estimate the total amount taken at between thirty-five hundred and four thousand dollars. You could get to the West Indies pretty well on that."

Lucille looked at me steadily from her round, gray eyes. "Colly didn't do those robberies," she said.

What could I say? God knows, Colly had never been a saint. She knew that, all right, but this time he was innocent. All the evidence, and all the words, weren't going to change that in her eyes.

I got a cigarette from my pocket, made a project of lighting it. The taste added more dryness to my mouth. Without looking at her, I said, "What do you want me to do, Lucille?"

"I want you to prove Colly was innocent. I want you to prove he

didn't do what they're saying he did."

"I'd like nothing better. You know that. But how can I do it? The evidence—"

"Damn the evidence!" Her wide mouth trembled with the sudden emotion. "Colly was innocent, I tell you! I won't have him buried with this last mark against his name. I won't have it!"

"Lucille, listen to me—"

"I won't listen," she said. "Colly was your friend. You stood up for him with the parole board. You helped him find his job. You talked to him, guided him. He was a different man, a new man, and you helped make him that way. Will you sit there and tell me you believe he threw it all away for four thousand dollars? Will you just sit there and let them brand him with these crimes, not knowing for certain if he was guilty? Or don't you care?"

I still could not meet her eyes. I stared down at the burning cigarette in my fingers, watching the smoke rise, curling, a gray spiral in the cold air of my office, and I said, "I care, Lucille."

"Then help me," she said. "For Colly. For your friend."

It was a long time before I said, "All right, Lucille. I'll see what I can do."

She stood then, head up, the way

it had always been, and the anger was gone. There remained only the sadness. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to come on like that."

"Don't be sorry," I said, rising too. "He was your husband."

She nodded, her throat working, and there were no more words for either of us.

They told me at the Hall of Justice that Inspector Eberhardt was out somewhere, but that he would be back within the hour. I went across Bryant Street and down a short alley to a coffee shop. I had three cups of coffee and smoked six cigarettes. Forty-five minutes passed.

When I went outside again, it had begun to drizzle. Some of the chill had gone out of the air, but the wind was stronger now. The clouds overhead were black and puffed, ready to burst.

I went inside the Hall of Justice again, rode the elevator upstairs, and this time Eberhardt was in. He was dressed in a brown suit that looked as if it had been hand-washed in lye soap. His tie was crooked, and there was a collar button missing from his shirt. He wore a reddish-blue bruise over his left eye.

"All right," he said, "make it quick, will you?"

"What happened to your eye?"

"I bumped into a doorknob."

"That's supposed to be my line."
"Yeah," he said. "You come here to pass the time of day, or was there something? I haven't been to bed in thirty-eight hours, and I'm in no mood for banter."

"I'd like a favor, Eb."

"Sure," Eberhardt said. "And I'd like three weeks vacation."

"I want to look at an officer's report."

"Are you nuts?" Eberhardt said. "Get out of here!"

"There was a shooting last night," I said. "Two squad car cops killed a man running away from the scene of a robbery out in Glen Park."

"So?"

"The man was a friend of mine." Eberhardt gave me a look. "What friend?"

"Colly Babcock."

"Do I know him?"

"I don't think so. He did two stretches in San Quentin for burglary. I helped to send him up the first time, when I was on the cops."

"Glen Park," Eberhardt said. "That's where they've been having those robberies."

"Yeah," I said. "According to the papers, they've tabbed Colly as their man."

"Only you don't think so."

"Colly's wife doesn't think so," I said. "I guess maybe I don't either."

"I can't let you look at any re-

ports," Eberhardt said, "and even if I could, it's not my department. Robbery'll be handling it."

"You could pull some strings."

"I could, but I won't. I'm up to my ears in something. I just don't have the time."

I got to my feet. "Well, thanks anyway, Eb." I had my hand on the doorknob before he called my name, stopping me. I turned to him.

"If things go all right," Eberhardt said, not looking at me, "I'll be off duty in a couple of hours. If I happen to get down by Robbery, I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, Eb," I said. "I appreciate it."

He didn't say anything—he was reaching for the telephone—but he heard me, all right.

I went to a bar called Luigi's, out in the Mission, where I found Tommy Belknap. He was drinking whiskey at the long bar, and staring at the wall. There were two men in work clothes drinking beer and eating sandwiches from lunch pails at the other end, and in the middle an old lady in a white shawl sipped dark red wine with arthritic fingers. I sat on a stool next to Tommy, and said hello.

He turned slowly. His face was an anemic white, and his bald head shone with beaded perspiration. He had trouble focusing his eyes, and

he wiped at them with the back of one veined hand. He was packing one, all right; a big one, and I knew why.

"Hey," he said when he recognized me, "have a drink, will you?"

"Not just now."

Tommy got his glass to his lips, drank tremulously. "Colly's dead," he said.

"Yes, I know."

"They killed him last night," Tommy said. "They shot him in the back."

"Take it easy," I said.

"He was my friend," Tommy said.

"He was my friend, too."

"Colly was a nice guy. They had no right to shoot him like that."

"He was robbing a liquor store," I said quietly.

"The hell he was!" Tommy swiveled on the stool and pushed a finger at my chest. "Colly was straight, you hear that? Straight ever since he got out."

"Was he, Tommy?"

"You're damned right he was."

"He didn't pull those robberies in Glen Park?"

"I told you, didn't I? He was straight."

"Who did pull them, Tommy?"

"I don't know."

"Come on," I said. "You get around. There must be something

adrift on them by now, right?"

"Nothing," Tommy said. "Don't know."

"Kids?" I said. "Street gang?"

"Don't know," Tommy said.

"Don't know."

"But not Colly? You'd know if it was Colly?"

"Colly was straight," Tommy said. "And now he's dead."

He put his head down on his arms and the bartender came over. He was a fat man with a reddish handlebar mustache. "You can't sleep in here, Tommy," he said.

"Colly's dead," Tommy said, and there were tears in his eyes.

"Let him alone," I said to the bartender.

"I can't have him sleeping in here."

I took out my wallet and put a dollar bill on the bar. "Then give him another drink."

The bartender looked at me, then at the dollar. He shrugged and walked away.

I went out into the rain.

D. E. O'Mira and Company, Wholesale Plumbing Supplies, was a large, two-storied building that took up three-quarters of a block on Berry Street, out near China Basin.

I parked on the street in front and went inside. In the center of the office was a glass-walled switchboard, tended by a dark-haired girl

wearing a print dress and a set of headphones.

I asked the girl if Mr. Templeton was in. She told me he was at a meeting downtown, and would not be back all day. Mr. Templeton was the office manager, and the man I had spoken to about giving Colly Babcock a job when he was paroled from San Quentin.

I thought about talking to one of the vice-presidents the company sported, but then decided they wouldn't have had much contact with Colly. Since he'd worked in the warehouse, I thought it best if I talked to his immediate supervisor. I asked the girl where the shipping office was.

She pointed to a set of swing doors to the left, opposite the main entrance. I pushed the doors open, followed a narrow, dark hallway, screened on both sides, and came out in the warehouse. On my left was a long counter. Behind it were display shelves, and behind them long rows of bins that stretched the width of the building. There were four or five men standing in front of the counter, and two more behind it, taking orders. Through an open doorway I could see the loading dock, and out to a cluttered yard where several pick-up trucks were parked. On my right was a windowed office with two desks, neither occupied, and an

other room jammed with an oblong workbench and dusty cartons. I stepped inside the office.

An old man in a pair of baggy brown slacks, a brown vest, and a battered slouch hat that appeared to be as old as he was stood before a narrow counter opposite the two unoccupied desks. A foul-smelling cigar danced in his thin mouth as he shuffled papers.

I waited for a time, but the old man did not look up. Finally I cleared my throat. "Excuse me," I said.

He looked up then, grudgingly, eyed me up and down, and went back to his papers. "What is it?" he said, scribbling on one of the papers with a pencil.

"Are you Mr. Harlin?"

"That's right."

I told him my name and what I did, and then I said, "I wonder if I might talk to you for a moment."

"Go ahead and talk."

"Privately, if you don't mind."

He looked at me again. "What about?"

"Colly Babcock," I said.

He shuffled his papers again, then motioned me ahead of him, out onto the dock and up to the wide double-door entrance to a second, high-beamed warehouse. There the old man stopped and turned to me. "We can talk here."

"You were Colly's supervisor, is

what I've been told. Is that right?"

"I was."

"Tell me about him."

"You won't hear anything bad, if that's what you're looking for."

"That's not what I'm looking for."

He thought about that for a moment, then shrugged. "Colly was a good worker," he said. "Did what you told him, no fuss. Quiet sort, kept to himself mostly."

"You knew about his prison record?"

"We knew, all of us. Nothing was ever said to Colly about it, though. I saw to that."

"Did he seem happy with the job?"

"Happy enough," the old man said. "Never grumbled or complained, if that's what you mean."

"No friction with any of the other men?"

"No. He got along fine with all of them."

A horn sounded from inside the second warehouse, and a yellow forklift carrying a pallet of lavatories came out. We stepped out of the way, and the thing clanked and belched past, moving along the dock.

I said to the old man, "Mind telling me your reaction to what happened?"

"Didn't believe it," he answered. "None of us did. I ain't sure I be-

lieve it yet, I don't mind saying."

I nodded. "Did Colly have any particular friend here? Somebody he ate lunch with regularly, like that?"

"Kept to himself mostly, like I said, but he did stop with Sam Biehler for a beer a time or two after work."

"Would it be all right if I talked to this Biehler?"

"All right with me," the old man said. He paused, chewing on his cigar. "Listen, is there any chance Colly didn't do what they say? Oh, sure, I know all about what the papers put down, but a man'd have to be a fool to believe half of that."

"There might be, Mr. Harlin," I said.

"Anything I can do," he said, "you let me know."

"I'll let you know."

We went back inside, and I spoke to Sam Biehler, a tall, slender man with a mane of silver hair that gave him, despite his work clothes, a rather distinguished appearance.

"I don't mind telling you," Biehler said to me, "I don't believe a word of it. I'd have had to be there to see it with my own eyes before I'd believe it, and maybe not even then."

"I understand you, and Colly stopped for a beer occasionally?"

"Once a week maybe, after

work. No more often than that."

"What did you talk about?"

"The job, mostly. What was wrong with the company, what they could do to improve things. You know the way fellows talk."

"Anything else?"

"About Colly's past, is that what you're getting at?"

"I guess it is."

"Just once," Biehler said. "Colly told me a few things, but I never pressed him on it. I don't like to pry."

"What was it he told you, Mr. Biehler?"

"That he was never going back to prison," Biehler said. "That he was through with the kind of life he'd led before. That he was at peace with the world for the first time in his life." He looked at me, eyes sparking, as if challenging me. "And you know something?"

"What's that, Mr. Biehler?"

"I been on this earth for fifty-nine years," he said. "I've known a lot of men in that time. You get so you can tell."

I waited.

"Colly wasn't lying," Biehler said.

After I left Biehler I spent a half-hour in the Public Library, reading back-dated issues of the *Chronicle* and the *Examiner*. The Glen Park robberies had begun six weeks ago, and I had paid only

passing attention to them at the time. When I had acquainted myself with the reported details, I went back to my office and called Lucille Babcock.

"The police were just here," she said. "They had a search warrant."

"Did they find anything?"

"There was nothing to find."

"What did they say?"

"They asked a lot of questions," she said. "They wanted to know about bank accounts and safety deposit boxes."

"Did you cooperate with them?"

"Yes."

"Good." I told her what I had been doing all morning, and about what the people I had talked with said.

"You see?" she said when I had finished. "Nobody who knew Colly can believe he's guilty."

"Nobody but the police," I said softly.

"The police," she repeated, but there was no animosity in her voice.

I sat holding the phone. There were a lot of things I wanted to say, but they all seemed trite and meaningless. After a long moment I told her I would be in touch, then I hung up. The palms of my hands were moist.

I took a cigarette out of my pack but I was out of matches. I rummaged through my desk, but there

were none there. I put the cigarette back in the pack.

I reached out and put my hand on the telephone but before I could lift the receiver the bell rang. I picked it up and it was Eberhardt.

"I was just going to call you," I said.

"I've been trying to call *you* for two hours."

"Something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Quit trying to hedge," he said. "You know what it is."

"Okay," I said. "Where are you now?"

"Home."

"May I stop by?"

"If you can get up here within the half hour. I'm going to bed then, and my wife has orders to bar all the doors and windows and take the telephone off the hook."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," I said.

Eberhardt lived on Collingwood, at the foot of Twin Peaks. The house was small and white and comfortable, a stucco job with a trimmed lawn and flowers in neat rows. If you knew Eberhardt, the house was sort of symbolic; it typified everything the honest, hard-working cop was dedicated to protecting. I imagine he knew it, too; and if he did, got a perverse satisfaction from the knowledge. That was the way Eberhardt was.

I parked in his driveway, went up and knocked on the door. His wife, a tiny, red-haired woman with astounding patience, let me in, asked how I was and showed me into the kitchen, closing the door behind her as she left.

Eberhardt was sitting at the table, having a pipe, a cup of coffee in front of him. There was a professional-looking bandage over the bruise on his eye.

"Have a seat," he said. "You want some coffee?"

"Thanks."

He got me a cup, indicated a manila envelope on the table, then made an elaborate effort to ignore me, sucking at his pipe.

Inside the envelope was the report made by the two patrolmen, Avinisi and Carstairs, who had shot and killed Colly Babcock in the act of robbing the Budget Liquor Store. I read it over carefully, my eye catching on a couple of sentences under "Effects". When I was through, I put the report back in the envelope and returned it to the table.

Eberhardt looked at me then. "Well?"

"One item," I said, "that wasn't in the papers."

"What's that?"

"They found a pint of Kesslers in a paper bag in Colly's coat pocket."

Eberhardt shrugged. "It was a liquor store, wasn't it? Maybe he slipped it into his pocket on the way out."

"And put it into a paper bag first?"

"People do funny things," he said.

"Yeah." I drank some of the coffee, then got on my feet.

"You leaving already?"

"Uh, huh. I've got some things to do."

"You owe me a favor," he said. "Remember that."

"I won't forget."

"You and the elephants," he said.

I wedged my car into a downhill parking slot on Chenery Street, a half-block from the three-room flat Lucille and Colly Babcock had called home for the past year. I walked through the rain, feeling the chill of it on my face, and mounted wooden steps to the door. Lucille answered on my first knock.

She wore the same black dress she had worn to my office that morning; I had the idea, looking at her, that she had been sitting in the silence of the empty flat, sitting in one chair, for most of the day.

We exchanged greetings and she let me in. I sat in the old, stuffed leather chair by the window; Colly's chair.

Lucille said, "Can I get you

something?" She spoke wearily.

I shook my head. "What about you?" I asked. "Have you eaten anything today?"

"No," she answered.

"You have to eat, Lucille."

"Maybe later."

"All right," I said. I rotated my hat in my hands, staring at it. I had some things I wanted to ask her, but I did not want to instill any false hopes. I had an idea, but it was only that, and too early.

I made conversation for a while, going over again my talk with Tommy Belknap and my visit to D. E. O'Mira. When I thought I could insert it without arousing her curiosity, I said, "You mentioned this morning that Colly liked to take walks in the evening. Was he in the habit of walking to any particular place, or in any particular direction?"

"No, he just liked to walk. He was gone for an hour or two sometimes."

"He never mentioned where he'd been?"

"Just that he walked around the neighborhood."

Around the neighborhood, yet the alley where Colly Babcock had been shot to death was eleven blocks from this flat on Chenery Street. He could have walked in a straight line, or he could have gone round-about in any direction.

I said, "Colly liked to have a nightcap when he came back from these walks, is that right?"

"He did, yes."

"He kept a bottle here, then?"

"Yes."

I continued to rotate my hat. "I wonder if I could have a small drink, Lucille."

She nodded slowly and went to a squat wooden cabinet near the kitchen door. She swung the panel open in the front, looked inside. "I'm sorry," she said. "We—I seem to be out."

"It's all right," I said. "I should be going anyway."

"Where will you go now?"

"To see some people."

"You'll let me know, won't you?"

"I will," I said. "I was wondering if you might have a picture of Colly, Lucille? A snapshot?"

"I think so," she said, "but why would you want a picture?"

"It might be that I'll need it," I said vaguely. "I have to see a lot of people."

She seemed satisfied with that. "I'll see if I can find one for you."

She went into the bedroom, returned a minute or two later with a black-and-white snap of Colly, head-and-shoulders, that had been taken in the livingroom there. He was smiling, one eyebrow raised in mock raffishness.

I put the snap into my pocket and thanked Lucille. Then I went to the door and let myself out.

The skies had parted like the Red Sea. Drops of rain as big as hail pellets lashed the sidewalk. Thunder rumbled in the distance, edging closer. I pulled the collar of my coat tighter around my neck, and made a run for my car.

Later, I entered Tay's Liquors on Whitney Street, and stood dripping water on the floor. They had a heater on a shelf just inside the door, and I allowed myself the luxury of its warmth for a few moments. Then I went to the counter.

A young man wearing a white shirt with a green garter on one sleeve got up from a stool near the cash register and walked down to me, smiling. "Kind of wet out there," he said.

"Maybe you can help me."

"Sure," he said. "Name your poison."

I took the snapshot of Colly Babcock from my pocket and extended it across the counter. "Have you ever seen this man before?"

He looked at me. "Cop?" he asked, but his voice was still amicable.

I sighed, and showed him my identification. He shrugged, squinted at the picture, and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "You know," he said, "I might have seen this

guy at that. It's just possible."

I did not feel quite as cold as I had when I came in. I had been walking the streets of Glen Park for two and a half hours now, had been to eight liquor stores, two all-night markets, a delicatessen, and six bars that sold off-sale. I had come up with nothing, except possibly a head-cold.

The young man was still studying the picture. "Fellow looked like that stopped in here last night," he said. "Nice old bird, too."

"About what time?"

"Eleven-thirty or so."

Fifteen minutes before Colly Babcock had been shot to death in an alley three and a half blocks away. I said, "What did he buy, do you remember?"

"Let's see," the young man said. "Bourbon, I think. Medium price."

"Kesslers?"

"Yeah, I think it was."

"Thanks," I said. "What's your name?"

"Wait a minute. I don't want to get involved in anything."

"Don't worry," I said. "It's nothing like you're thinking."

A bit reluctantly, he gave me his name and his address. I wrote it down, thanked him again, and got out of there. I had something more than an idea now.

Eberhardt said, "I ought to lay

one right on your square chin."

He had just come out of the bedroom, eyes foggy with sleep, hair standing straight up, wearing bathrobe and pajamas. His wife stood beside him.

I held up my hand. "I'm sorry to get you out of bed, Eb, but this couldn't wait."

He said something which I didn't hear, but which his wife heard. She cracked him lightly on the arm to show her disapproval, then turned and left the room.

Eberhardt sat on the couch, finger-combed his hair, then glared up at me. "What's so damned important?"

"Colly Babcock," I said.

"You don't give up, do you?"

"Sometimes I do, but not this time. Not now." I told him what I had learned at Tay's Liquors.

He thought about it. "Doesn't prove much," he said finally. "So he bought a bottle there."

"Eb," I said, "if he was planning to hit a liquor store, do you think he would have bothered to *buy* a bottle fifteen minutes before?"

"The job might have been spur-of-the-moment," Eberhardt said.

"Colly didn't work that way. When he was pulling them, they were all carefully planned, well in advance."

"He was getting old," Eberhardt said. "They change."

He was making argument, but he hadn't known Colly. I said, "There are a few other things."

"Such as?"

"The burglaries," I said. "I did some reading up on them. They run in a pattern, Eb. Back door jimmied, marks on the jamb and lock. Hand bar, or something." I paused. "They didn't find any hand bar on Colly."

"Maybe he got rid of it."

"When did he have time? They caught him coming out the door."

Eberhardt wet his lips. I could tell I was getting his interest. "Go ahead," he said.

"The pattern," I said. "Doors jimmied, drawers rifled, papers strewn about. No fingerprints, but it smacks of amateurism, Eb."

He rubbed the beard stubble on his jaw. "And Colly was a professional."

"He could have done the book. He was neat and precise. He did not ransack. He always knew exactly what he was after. He never deviated from that, Eb. Not once."

Eberhardt got to his feet and walked to the curtained bay window. He stood there with his back to me. "What do you think, then?"

"You figure it."

He was silent for a time. Then he said, very slowly, "I can figure it, all right. But I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

"And Colly?" I said. "Did he like it any better?"

Eberhardt turned abruptly and went to the telephone. He made a call, spoke to someone, and then someone else. When he hung up, he was already unbuttoning his bathrobe. At the bedroom door he stopped, asked, "You want to come along?"

"No. It's not my place."

He looked at me. "I hope you're wrong, you know that."

I met his eyes. "I hope I'm not," I said.

I was sitting in the darkness of my apartment, smoking, when the telephone rang three hours later. I let it ring a few times, then picked up the receiver and said hello.

"You weren't wrong," Eberhardt said.

I let out my breath slowly, waiting.

"Avinisi and Carstairs," Eberhardt said. There was bitterness in his voice. "Each of them on the force a little more than a year. The old story: bills, long hours, not enough pay. They cooked up the idea one night while they were cruising, and tried it out. It worked pretty good; who'd figure the cops for it?"

"I'm sorry, Eb," I said.

"So am I."

"You have any trouble?" I asked.

"Not much."

"What about Colly Babcock?"

"It was the other way around," Eberhardt said. "He was cutting through the alley when he saw them coming out the rear door. He turned to run and they panicked. Avinisi got him in the back. When they went to check, Carstairs recognized him from the mug books; they have the rookies reading them through now."

"And they saw a way to get out from under," I said. "Look, Eb—"

"Forget it," he said. "I know what you're going to say."

"You can't help but get a couple of them that way."

"I said to forget it."

"All right. See you, Eb."

"Yeah," he said. "See you." The line went dead.

I listened to the empty buzzing for a time. It's a lousy world, but sometimes, at least, there is justice.

Then I called Lucille Babcock and told her why her husband had died.

Colly was given a nice funeral. The service was held in a small, white non-denominational church on Monterey Boulevard. There were a lot of flowers; mostly roses, in yellow and red, the way Colly would have liked.

Quite a few people came. Tommy Belknap was there, and Sam Biehler and Old Man Harlin and the rest of them from D. E. O'Mira.

There were faces I didn't know, too; the story had gotten a big play in the papers.

Surprisingly, unless you knew him, Eberhardt was there and, of course, Lucille. She sat very straight on the wooden pew in front of the coffin, next to me, and her eyes were dry. She was some fine woman.

Afterward, we went to the cemetery, quiet and green with wide-pillared gates, and listened to the words and watched them put Colly into the ground. When it was done I offered to drive Lucille home, but she said no; there were some arrangements she wanted to make for gardening and for a headstone with the cemetery people, and that they would see to it that she got home all right.

I rode alone with the driver of the big, black hearse back to the church on Monterey Boulevard. Eberhardt was waiting there with his car. I walked over to him.

"I don't like funerals," he said.

"No," I agreed.

"What are you going to do now?"

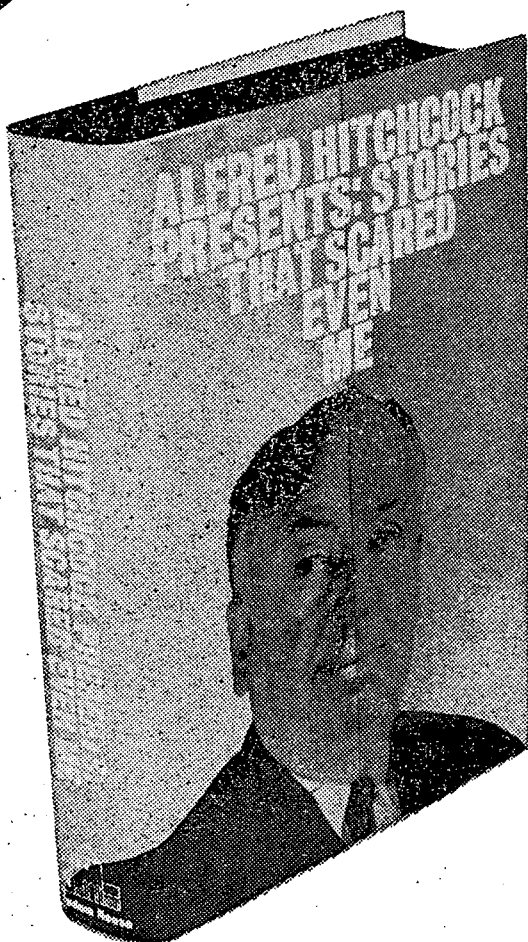
"I hadn't thought about it."

"Come on up to my place. My wife's gone off to visit her sister, and I've got some brandy there. Maybe we'll get drunk."

I got in beside him. "Maybe we will at that," I said.

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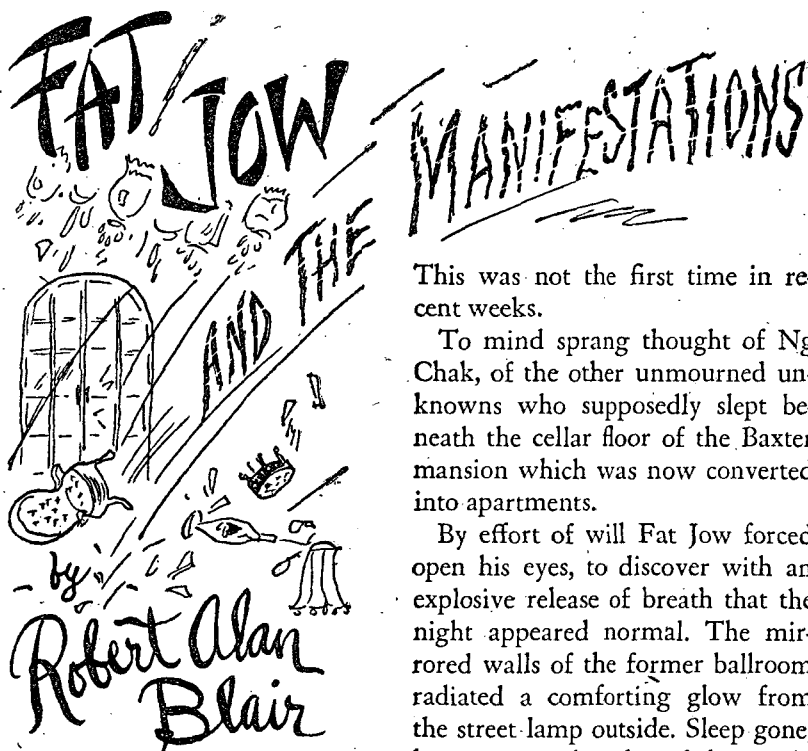
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As every nation has its poets—and its madmen—so has every problem a solution.



A SPASM of panicking terror chilled him out of the depths of sleep. For several suffocating heartbeats he dared not open his eyes lest this dank, buried sensation of encompassing moist earth prove reality instead of illusion. Again?

This was not the first time in recent weeks.

To mind sprang thought of Ng Chak, of the other unmourned unknowns who supposedly slept beneath the cellar floor of the Baxter mansion which was now converted into apartments.

By effort of will Fat Jow forced open his eyes, to discover with an explosive release of breath that the night appeared normal. The mirrored walls of the former ballroom radiated a comforting glow from the street-lamp outside. Sleep gone, he sat up on the edge of the couch.

From the dark bedroom at the rear came a soft whimper as the child Hsiang Yuen stirred in sleep. Fat Jow had initiated this sleeping arrangement since his grand-nephew's arrival; a boy needs a room of his own.

He tiptoed to the bedroom doorway, to be reassured by the child's regular breathing. A dream, perhaps; that it had coincided with his own waking interested him. Had he too dreamed? His sleep had been sound. He returned to sit upon the couch, smiled slightly. Fears and uncertainties are magnified out of proportion in the silent midnight hours—yet the disquieting feeling was not entirely dispelled.

A tinkling drew his eyes toward the ceiling, where the crystal chandelier was quivering visibly, its teardrop pendants alive with reflected specks of light. This was no earth tremor, so common through the year in San Francisco, for only the chandelier moved—not the room.

The tinkling faded, the dancing lights gentled; then an abrupt crash in the room brought him tensely standing. His worn leather rocker had fallen, beside it a table and broken crockery lamp. His apartment door, which he had locked before retiring, burst inward as from a violent kick, but he saw no one in the dimness of the foyer beyond.

A corresponding bang across the foyer, a series of crashes and screams from his landlady's apartment, goaded Fat Jow from his trance. Hurriedly he put on robe

and slippers, ventured out into the foyer. Down the shadowy, lightwell echoed the voices of alarmed tenants from the balconied landings of the upper floors.

A man's voice rose over the rest: "Who screamed?"

From the darkness of Adah Baxter's apartment she rushed, spectral in white nightdress, her white hair unbound and flying. Her customary regal dignity abandoned, she clung wordlessly to Fat Jow, a head shorter than she. From her apartment sounded a final smashing of glass—and no more.

"A mild quake," offered Fat Jow, in explanation to the voices above. "I think it has passed."

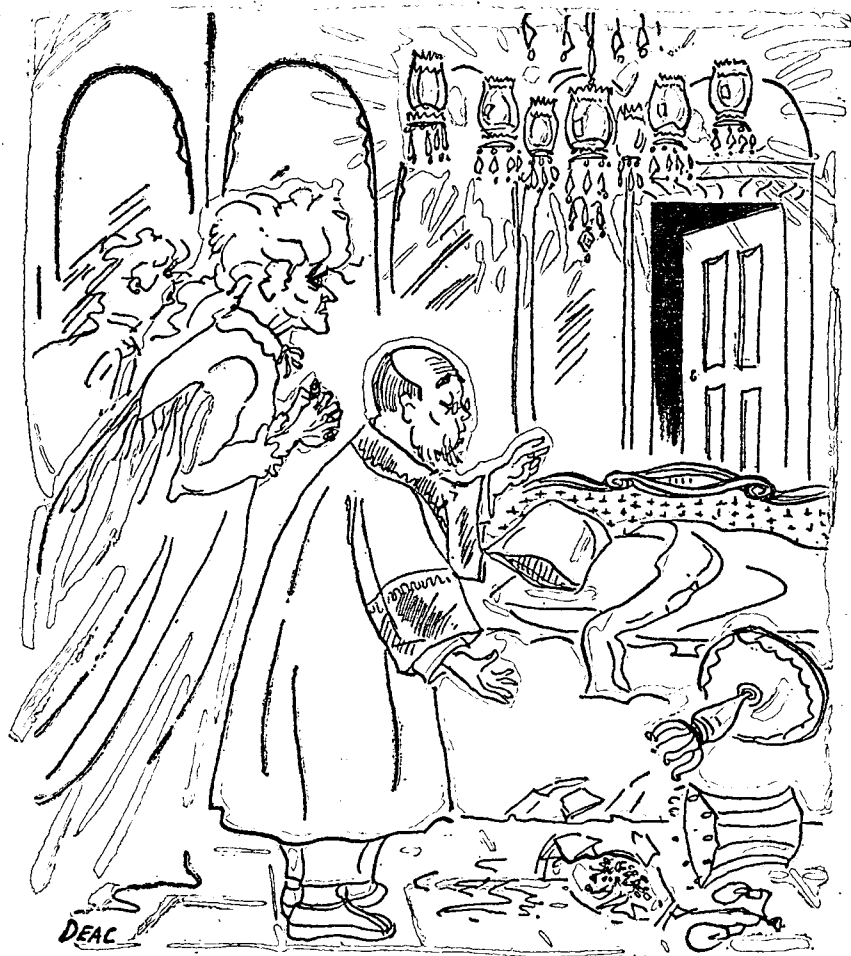
Adah Baxter whispered fiercely to him, "You and I know that was no quake!"

A woman called down, "Is anything wrong, Miss Baxter?"

She looked fearfully back toward her apartment. "No . . . really," she quavered. "I was . . . frightened, that's all." In a rapid undertone to Fat Jow, she added, "I can't go back in there. May I come in with you for a while?"

Wearily he gestured toward his door. "Sleep is quite far from these eyes," he said. He reached in past her and switched on the chandelier.

Adah Baxter paused at sight of his tipped furniture. "It—it was in here, too?"



"It appeared to begin in here," he said, righting table and rocker and kicking the pieces of the lamp aside, "then passed into your apartment . . . through two locked doors."

"Oh, dear!" She dropped limply into the rocker. "The child! Have

you seen to the child? The poor thing must be terrified."

He listened at the bedroom doorway, softly pulled the door shut. "Nothing disturbs Hsiang Yuen," he said with indulgent pride, taxing imagination to define an area of excellence. He pulled the blan-

ket from the couch and placed it about her shoulders.

"It wasn't what I'd thought," she said desolately.

"What had you thought?"

"That it was those real-estate people, trying to scare me into selling the house. I wish it were—I'd rather be mad than scared—but this wasn't that, was it?"

"It is questionable," said Fat Jow.

She hugged her shoulders and swayed. "I guess I've been waiting for something like this."

Fat Jow sat on the couch, frowned at the floor. "Do you pretend to know?"

"Well, don't you?"

"I try to believe this matter of your former tenants to be all a misunderstanding, but I find it difficult. If they *are* in the cellar . . ."

"But I told you . . ." Adah Baxter looked out through his open apartment door into the foyer. "I wonder which one of them it was?" she mused.

He asked uncomfortably. "How many?"

"Good gracious, who counts? They go back over a period of sixty-some years. My memory's not what it used to be."

"Were they all . . . oriental gentlemen?"

"Oh my, no. Only the last two . . . or was it three? I'd had such bad luck with occidentals that I

thought orientals would be more dependable, if you know what I mean. But it didn't work."

"One does not choose dependable traits," observed Fat Jow, "by a person's accident of origin. Every nation has produced its poets—and its madmen. Besides the noises, Miss Baxter, did you happen to feel also a great fear?"

"Yes, after the noises started."

"Have there been other manifestations before now?"

"No!" It was a new thought. "Isn't it strange they've waited all this time?"

"Perhaps we grasp the obvious answer because it is easier," he said with faint hope.

"But how can we know?" she wailed. "When will it come again?"

"Whatever it is, it would not seem malevolent. It has not offered to harm us." He would not perturb her further by telling her of his other broken sleeps. "Let us assess the damage in your apartment."

Hesitantly she followed him across the foyer, gaining confidence when he turned on the lights.

The oil portrait of her father lay facedown on the hearth rug, the copper samovar in which she brewed her singular tea lying beside it among the scattered fire tools. By the door to her room a throw rug had been curled back,

a small chair upset. In her room they found the window shattered outward, fragments in the flower border below.

Giving the buried tenants a more suitable interment must only draw official attention and, despite her lethal leanings, Fat Jow entertained an affection for Adah Baxter so would not see her come to harm. The Walking Woman, sweeping grandly through the city in picture hat and long black gown, was to be preserved as jealously as any cherished landmark.

"I should like your permission," said Fat Jow, "to consult an expert in these matters."

"If it will do any good," she said fervently, "go right ahead."

He moved toward the door. "Do you wish me to remain?"

"I'll be fine, thanks."

Fat Jow bowed himself out.

The Buddhist Temple on Pacific was built with contributions of money, material and labor, not only from Buddhists but also from persons of every faith and no faith throughout the Bay Area. Its austere functional lines show the heady new flavor imparted to Buddhist tradition by transplantation from Asia to America.

Fat Jow sought through the peripheral chambers of the temple, found his young friend, the novice, at study in the library. Catch-

ing his eye from the doorway, he beckoned him into the passage.

"If you have not yet enjoyed the midday meal," said Fat Jow, "please join me."

Kwan Ho stretched his stiff muscles. "Knowing you, I'd say there was more than hospitality behind this."

"You are the only person I know who makes a serious study of parapsychology."

"At last!" laughed Kwan Ho. "My two semesters at Duke University pay off, a free lunch."

Over dishes of Wandering Dragon in the relaxed atmosphere of a restaurant on Grand Avenue, Fat Jow related the midnight occurrences.

Kwan Ho interrupted: "That's the second time you've mentioned buried tenants. Your symbolism escapes me."

"No symbolism." Fat Jow looked about them, lowered his voice. "You will hold this in confidence?"

"If that's what you want."

"There are some buried tenants in the cellar . . . I think. I have never been certain, nor wish to be. One must, however, give Miss Baxter credit for selectivity. She chooses for this honor only those who reveal themselves to be after her hidden hoard of currency. And she is relatively humane; her position has a gentle soporific effect."

Forgetting to eat, Kwan Ho stared at him. "You're dead serious."

"Yes. The Walking Woman is rather unusual."

"But the police . . ."

"She promptly reports each demise to the police, as it occurs, but such is her nostalgic reputation that they fondly disbelieve her. They think it is all in her mind, as indeed it may be, since the vanished opportunists who have attempted to victimize her are not of a sort to have family or friends eager to trace them."

"But *you* don't think it's all in her mind, do you?"

"No. She may be an habitual killer, but Adah Baxter is as rational as you or I."

Kwan Ho grunted. "Everyone to his hobby."

"If there be such a thing as infestation by spirits, will your skill enable you to banish them?"

Kwan Ho scratched his head. "These days, one is less and less inclined to look for the occult behind phenomena like this. Often it turns out to be loose floorboards, rattling pipes, rubbing branches, or mice."

"I am sure we may eliminate these."

"So am I. When you'd had a chance to look at things in the light of day, did you get any ideas?"

Fat Jow nodded slowly. "Two possibilities, neither of which satisfies: the one, because no unscrupulous real-estate developer could have produced these effects from outside the house; and the other, because I am reluctant to accept a supernatural explanation."

Kwan Ho winced. "Supernatural has become a bad word. Today's abnormal or paranormal may be tomorrow's commonplace. If phenomena conform to standards or laws of their own, they ought to take their place *in* nature, not beyond it. Frankly, only one part of your whole picture, that cold feeling of terror, might be blamed indirectly on your friends in the cellar. But moving solid objects is something else, established experimentally in the laboratory; telekinesis, used by an agent who's very much alive. Before there was much formal study in the field, it was called a poltergeist. I'd want to go over the site before I offered any theory, though."

"This," said Fat Jow, beaming, "is exactly what I had hoped you would say."

Early the following Saturday, while Adah Baxter was absent on her daily circuit through North Beach and Chinatown, Kwan Ho came. Preferring to work without distraction of company or conversation, he prowled house and

grounds alone, missing nothing.

After nearly an hour he rejoined Fat Jow in his apartment. Absently he stalked in, stood just inside the closed door. Manner and voice were awed: "I counted sixteen cement patches in that cellar floor. Do you suppose . . ." He made no attempt to finish the sentence.

Fat Jow leaned back in his rocker and studied the chandelier. "The less I know with certainty, the less I am troubled. What have you to report?"

"I'm not one of your true ESP-ers, understand, but I can detect a signal here and there, if I put my mind to it." Kwan Ho hesitated, rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't like to give you something more to worry about, but the strongest signals I get are right here in this room."

Surprised and uncomfortable, Fat Jow asked, "And not down cellar?"

"None there. As a layman, you're conditioned by a long heritage of superstition to attribute powers to the remains of the deceased. Instead, the effects are felt at the scene of the decease itself. The event leaves its mark on the surroundings, sort of soaks into the woodwork."

Fat Jow glanced about restlessly. "Then relocation of the remains would accomplish nothing?"

"Probably not. About the only way to get rid of the signals is to destroy the building."

Fat Jow disliked what he was hearing. "Must we then live with these signals?"

Kwan Ho walked slowly around the room, pausing now and again as if listening. "There are actually two types of phenomena here, like a double set of signals, one amplifying the other, combining forces in a pretty good show. The residual effects of a past event are limited; they can only create a mood, or a vague illusion, and there they stop; but something else is influencing them, bringing them out into the open." He stopped in the middle of the room, thrust hands into trouser pockets. "Our knowledge of the forces involved is sketchy, but telekinesis is usually connected with a disturbed child lashing out at the offending world through his subconscious, while he's asleep."

Fat Jow stiffened in the rocker, eyes piercing the younger man. "Did you know about the child?"

"You didn't say there was a child."

"My grand-nephew from China lives with me." Fat Jow moved to the window to look out toward the vacant lot at the corner, where the neighboring children were playing. "His parents are dead, and the Reds released him to me."

Kwan Ho threw out his arms. "There you are! Why didn't you say so? If anybody's got an excuse to be disturbed, he has."

Fat Jow turned. "Hsiang Yuen is an excellent child, obedient and well-mannered."

"That's the worst kind; he's hiding something. You've got a Chinese poltergeist on your hands. You'd better find out what's bugging the kid, before he brings the roof down around your ears. He could, you know."

"Can you not learn this?"

"You're closer to him. I came to diagnose some phenomena, not to psychoanalyze the kid who's causing them. If you think it's beyond you, take him to a doctor."

Fat Jow said coldly, "There is no fault in his mind."

"Didn't say there was. But before this is over you may need professional help."

"How may one so small," asked Fat Jow sadly, "harbor anything but small problems?"

"Small? Uprooted from the only homeland he knows, trying to adjust to a radically different society—it's been too much for him to swallow in one gulp."

"But he has adapted, swiftly and admirably. He plays with the others, he attends the nursery school—"

"Regimentation!" said Kwan

Ho, snapping his fingers. "What would you expect? Naturally it reminds him of life in Red China, and doesn't fit in with the rest of his concept of America."

"Your logic aspires to the profundity of youth. The wounds of childhood may strike deep, but they heal rapidly and are soon forgotten. I would seek simpler and more immediate causes."

Kwan Ho shrugged and turned to leave. "Good luck! You may look a long time."

Alone again, Fat Jow retreated to the familiar embrace of his rocker and regarded himself in a mirrored panel.

Hsiang Yuen had settled readily and, Fat Jow thought, contentedly, into his new environment. Had not Fat Jow, concerned lest the child feel restricted by the conservative ways of an old man, followed the excellent advice of Mrs. Yick, the social worker from the neighborhood center, and sent him to her nursery school? She spoke knowingly of peer-group and parallel mental-emotional levels, of creative play and self-expression, of group therapy and healthy psychological development. This was a new world to Fat Jow as well as to Hsiang Yuen . . . and occasionally frightening.

How had he matured to manhood without any grasp of these

values? Preparing a child for his place in modern society seemed an overwhelming responsibility.

When Hsiang Yuen returned from play, Fat Jow beckoned him to his side. The child came solemnly and silently. He seldom smiled, for his short years had been less than happy. His father, a Red Army captain, had been killed by anti-Maoists on the streets of Canton; his mother, a minor Party of-



ficial, had died of illness within the year. Alone and apprehensive, he had flown the Pacific to the land of the Yankee imperialist enemy, to join this great-uncle whom he had never seen. Dutifully he stood before Fat Jow, hands clasped at his waist, eyes directed above, at the crystal chandelier.

"Come nearer," said Fat Jow, extending his hand.

Shyly Hsiang Yuen accepted his hand, climbed into his lap, leaned against the warmth of the old man. Fat Jow rested one arm lightly

about the small shoulders. "Do you like living here with me?"

"Yes, Uncle." The child's eyes remained upon the chandelier. "Does it sparkle at night too, when the lights are out?"

Fat Jow sighed. Patience . . . a child's attention is elusive, often ethereal, but follows its own reasoning. "A little," he replied, "but at night there is only the street-light for it to reflect. Perhaps there is something you do not like? Something you would want changed?"

After a thoughtful pause, Hsiang Yuen's eyes wandered from the chandelier to the bedroom door. "No, Uncle."

"I am sure there is something. Is it the nursery school?"

The child pondered, slowly formed an opinion. "I do not like Mrs. Yick," he said experimentally.

"Nonsense. Mrs. Yick is kind and wise, and she knows what is best for children who will soon be attending the elementary school." He could not confess that he too did not much like Mrs. Yick.

In a pleading note, the small round face tilted wistfully up at him. "Uncle, at first you took me with you to the herb shop. Why do you now send me away?"

"I do not send you away—" began Fat Jow, but his words died. Was Kwan Ho right? "You will be

spending many years in school," he argued. "It is better that you know what it is like."

Hsiang Yuen eyed him reproachfully, pushed down off his lap. "I liked the herb shop better," he grumbled, shuffling toward the room.

Fat Jow let the child accompany him to the herb shop on Monday. He set him to small tasks, saw him respond with professional devotion. Hsiang Yuen listened to the talk, watched Fat Jow's skillful fingers at their diverse functions. Toward the end of the day, Fat Jow felt that this was right, that the young absorb interest and learn from the old. Was not this the child's own choice?

Not unexpectedly, Mrs. Yick appeared late Wednesday afternoon as they were about to close the shop. From within the doorway she surveyed the scene with disapproval. She was as tall and as heavy as Fat Jow, her level gaze fortified by authoritarian dark-rimmed spectacles. "This child is not ill," she charged. "You are keeping him away deliberately."

"It is his wish," said Fat Jow. "He is happier here. I cannot deny him."

"You deny him far more by indulging his whim, by depriving him of the school environment. His formal enrollment will then be the

more difficult, that is certain."

Fat Jow shook his head, knowing the futility of explaining his true motive to someone like Mrs. Yick. He said sullenly, "I know what the child likes, and what he does not."

"He is better spending his days among those of his own generation," insisted Mrs. Yick; "not here, among the trappings of a primitive, outmoded craft."

He returned angrily, "The old is not to be discarded simply because it is old; it retains much of significance for the world of today." He waved about the shop. "Were this a restaurant or laundry, would your objection be as strong? Why do you focus upon my profession? Many Chinese-American children grow up in the business establishments of their parents."

"This is the Twentieth Century. Witchcraft and shamanism are being rooted out of civilized society, but they die hard."

Fat Jow drew himself up to his full five feet. "Traditional Chinese medicine is an ancient and honored art, requiring long years of study and operative techniques as delicate as those of any surgeon."

Mrs. Yick folded her plump arms in her immovable way. "The Health Department could put you out of business for dispensing drugs without a license."

He held up a finger. "Ah, since you mention this particular agency—" he started toward the wall-telephone, "—allow me to call the University of California Medical Center, where a distinguished faculty member—"

"Wait," she said with mingled uncertainty and curiosity. "What have you to do with them? I should expect you to stay away from there."

He turned back. "I have had the honor of working with them. When conventional courses of treatment have failed, as with advanced arthritis in the elderly, my friend has consulted me."

She whispered, "He . . . calls you?"

"Many medical men scoff, as do you; but others, like this man, who is a figure of national stature in the field of orthopedic surgery, look with scientific detachment upon traditional Chinese medicine. They cannot do less than the Chinese Reds. These most pragmatic of people permit it and actively support it."

"And you have been able to help?"

"Twice he approved acupuncture, and his patients responded favorably."

She shuddered. "Sticking needles in people! It sounds barbaric."

"There is relatively little pain.

The needles are placed with meticulous care, to avoid sensory areas. It is an exact science, Mrs. Yick. A child might do worse in his choice of career."

"I hardly know what to say," said Mrs. Yick, slightly subdued. "I understand much now that I did not before." Her voice firmed. "But I still think Hsiang Yuen needs a school environment."

Fat Jow looked down at Hsiang Yuen, a rapt listener. "It is your life we juggle so blithely. Would you feel better about going to Mrs. Yick's if you spent part of the week here with me?"

Hsiang Yuen brightened, and the beginnings of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I think I would like that," he said.

"A compromise?" Fat Jow asked Mrs. Yick.

"A compromise," she said, smiling now.

Mrs. Yick then drove them home through the evening traffic, across Nob Hill. Wednesday was gone, and the child had his half-week at the herb shop; he would appear at the nursery school in the morning.

Fat Jow knew a relaxing sense of accomplishment—and the nights were serene. After two weeks had passed without incident he began to hope that he had divined Hsiang Yuen's unsettling problem—if, indeed, such had been the cause of

the manifestations. Professional help had not been required.

They were partly into a third week when Fat Jow awoke shivering, cold through chest and shoulders. It was a simple physical cold, because he had become uncovered. This in itself was not unusual but as consciousness returned, he found that the blanket and sheet, with a gentle steady motion, were creeping down over the foot of the couch. He hauled back upon them without effect, for they moved with a force beyond his strength and weight. He released them; and they landed in a heap on the floor.

He sat up, perplexed, unsure of his next move. This decision was taken from him when slowly the couch tilted from back to front, and he scurried to a safe distance to avoid its toppling over upon him; but when he was away, it settled back into position as if content to have dislodged him.

Wavering now between fear and frustration, Fat Jow put on robe and slippers. Another wakeful night was indicated. He approached the couch, stopped when it moved again.

The apartment door banged open, and he awaited the corresponding bang from Adah Baxter's door . . . but nothing. Cautiously he emerged into the foyer, peered into the shadows, then up-

ward, where a tiny creaking and scraping from the top of the light-well recalled to him Kwan Ho's words: ". . . before he brings the roof down around your ears."

The stained-glass dome, three stories up, spanned most of the foyer. Discretion prompted Fat Jow to step back into the comparative shelter of his doorway. The century-old house was forever giving voice to its infirmities, but Fat Jow was not an adventurous person, especially not after midnight.

With an abrupt tiny tinkle that was immediately swallowed in the vastness of the foyer, a single triangular piece of stained glass fell and shattered upon the parquet floor. Had his door been closed, he would not have heard it. He waited motionless fully ten minutes, but nothing more happened, and no one came.

Why a single small piece? It would seem that the night's foray had been abandoned when hardly begun.

Grimly he turned and strode through his apartment to the bedroom; an understanding with Hsiang Yuen was overdue. Without hesitation he switched on the overhead bedroom light. Let the child wake.

Anger drained away. The bed was empty, and Fat Jow was the sole occupant of the room. Unbe-

lieving, he groped over the tumbled bedclothes, knelt to look under the bed, inspected the closet, the screened window, the bathroom. He dashed back to the open apartment door, ready to arouse the household, but he paused, hand on knob, looked toward the couch. The covers were again in place, drawn up to cover the small form of Hsiang Yuen, genuinely and soundly asleep.

Fat Jow looked down upon the child, then took himself quietly into the bedroom. He awoke to brilliant morning, refreshed and in good humor, for the bed was more comfortable than the couch.

Hsiang Yuen was standing by his side, tousled and bare-footed, smiling broadly. "I was in there when I woke," he announced with happy wonder. "The crystals make

little rainbows when the sun strikes them."

Fat Jow drew him to sit beside him. "And you like that."

"Thank you, Uncle."

"But I did not—" Fat Jow decided to let it pass. "Why did you not tell me from the beginning that you wished to sleep upon the couch?"

Hsiang Yuen's smile lessened. "I was ashamed."

"Ashamed? Of expressing a little preference?"

"No, Uncle . . . of being afraid of the dark."

Fat Jow, suppressing a smile, nodded gravely. He understood more than he wished to imply. "It is nothing of which to be ashamed. At your age, I was the same."

Small problems require small solutions.



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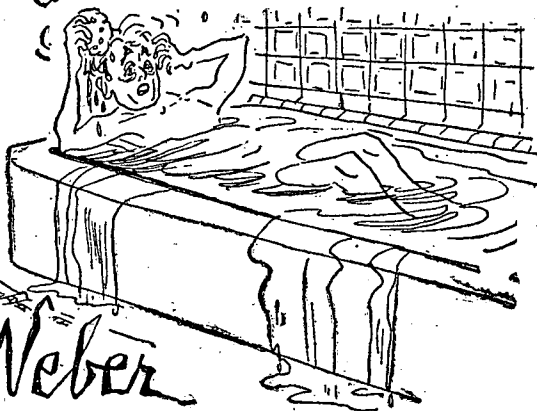
Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

I have a feeling that cures for serious afflictions are often hit upon by accident—more or less.

The FEELING

By
Thomasina Weber



IT WAS Friday, and Tracy Keenan was winding up the work on his desk before the weekend, when the feeling hit him—the popping, itching, bursting of skin gone mad. He pushed up the sleeve of his light summer shirt. There was no eruption, no reddening or swelling. His arm looked perfectly normal, just like that

first time, but the itch was real.

He remembered it clearly, the first time the feeling engulfed him, three months ago. He had been in the middle of the bay on his sailboat with Fran Hopkins, who had been one of his more attractive

dates—had been, because now she was dead. She had toppled over the side during a sudden squall and in panic had disappeared immediately. Tracy had had his hands full with the sail and by the time he got everything under control, he was yards away from where she had gone down and could not possibly have pinpointed

the spot. The feeling had been there, the prickly sensation on his arms and legs, the feeling as if hives were springing into bloom and spreading all over his body. He wanted to scratch everywhere at once and the agony mounted swiftly until he thought he would scream aloud. They eventually found Fran's body and when they did, physical relief came to Tracy Keenan and he fell into bed and slept for thirty hours.

The horror of the accident gradually dimmed and Tracy's life resumed its normal course. He went to his office every day, returning to his apartment at night. On weekends he drove to the marina and looked at his boat. He could not take it out again. Not yet.

Tracy slammed his desk drawer shut. He had to get home at once. He had to fill the tub with cool water and lie down in it. He grabbed his jacket off the coat tree.

"Where are you going, Tracy?" Betty Comerford asked. She was the girl who did his typing and answered the telephone, and while she was an efficient worker, sometimes she let her competence go to her head. He had been thinking of letting her go. When there were only two people in an office, it was disastrous if they did not harmonize.

"I have to leave," he said rudely.

"But you can't go now! I'm in the middle of drawing up the Smith contract and you have an appointment to show the Whitney house to that man from Tampa."

"Cancel it."

"I can't do that! We've been trying to sell that white elephant for—"

It happened so quickly he was hardly aware of it. One minute her indignant little face was staring up at him and the next minute she was lying on the floor, her head at an impossible angle against the file cabinet. He felt nothing except the agonizing itching and burning as he rushed out to his car.

He was sitting on the edge of a chair in a light robe when the police arrived two hours later. "We tried to get you on the phone," one of them said, looking around the apartment, "but I see it's off the hook."

"Don't feel well," said Tracy through clenched teeth. "Didn't want to be disturbed."

"We found your secretary dead in your office, Mr. Keenan. A passerby happened to look inside and saw her on the floor."

"Betty?" Even in his suffering, he knew he must express concern. Part of him remembered hitting her and seeing her go down, but it

was a shadowy scene. The other part of him, the important part, was involved in trying to restore normalcy to his system, issuing orders to keep his body quiet, trying to coax the blood to creep through his veins so as not to heighten his distress.

"No evidence of burglary. Safe was open, but there's money in it. Will you come down and check its contents for us?"

He could not refuse to go; they waited while he dressed. The clothes against his skin were pure torment. He accompanied them to his office, verified the fact that nothing was missing, gave the police Betty's set of keys so they could lock up when they had completed their examination of the premises and then returned to his apartment.

A week later—a week in which Tracy did not open the office but stayed home and suffered—they arrested Betty's boyfriend, who admitted having had an argument with her the night before her death when she told him she had decided to break off with him. Although he vehemently denied killing her, he had no alibi for the time of the murder. The police were proud of their fast work, and Betty's boyfriend was put in jail. With the man's arrest, Tracy's skin calmed and he went back to work, enor-

mously relieved, his mind at rest. The new girl he hired was the quiet type. Claire Raymond was not much to look at, but it was immediately apparent that she was capable of running the entire operation without any help from him. It looked as though his troubles were over.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should start dating Claire. He did not even remember asking her to dinner, but here they were, sharing a table in the plushiest restaurant in town while soft music played in the background. During the course of the evening he learned that she had come to Florida from Wyoming after a broken engagement, that she loved Florida and was sure she had made the right move. Across the table in the subdued light she still gave the impression of cool efficiency, even though she had changed from her carefully tailored office clothes.

"Do you like sailing?" he asked.

"I've never been on a sailboat," Claire replied.

"I'll take you out on mine tomorrow, if you like."

"That sounds marvelous."

Claire could not have been more surprised at the invitation than Tracy himself. Although he had been longing to go out on his sailboat again, the thought of Fran's

accident kept him from it. Now, probably because of Claire's level-headed personality, he found himself ready to take the step. She had a calming effect upon him and he felt comfortable with her. He envied people like Claire who never got flustered; people who could face anything that came along. She was the kind of woman Tracy needed, one who could keep him on an even keel. It was an enjoyable evening and they parted with plans for an early start the next day.

Tracy was to pick Claire up at eight, but at five-thirty he was sitting straight up in bed, wide awake, his body itching furiously. Without hesitation he filled the tub and sank into the cool water, resisting the almost overpowering urge to scratch until he bled. He would have to cancel their sailing date.

At half-past seven he reluctantly left the tub, wrapped himself in a towel and telephoned Claire to beg off.

"I'm sorry you're not feeling well," she said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I'm afraid not, Claire."

"I'd be glad to come over and sit with you."

"No! You can't do that!"

"Why not?" she asked, surprise in her voice.

He could hardly tell her it was because the two other times he had got the feeling, the person who was with him died. Maybe it was only coincidence, but he did not want to take the chance. "Well—it might be contagious," he said lamely.

She laughed. "That doesn't worry me."

"But you have to stay healthy so you can keep the office open. I may be out for a few days."

"I am a nurse at heart, and I never catch anything anyone else has. I'll come over a little later and sit with you anyway."

"No, Claire!" But she had hung up. He slammed the phone down in frustration. The only thing he could do was refuse to let her in when she arrived.

The towel was beginning to irritate his skin, so he flung it away. It was better when he had nothing touching him. He turned on the record player. The record was one he had bought a few days ago without listening to it first. When he had played it at home he found it to be a nerve-racking cacophony of sound and decided to return it. It had slipped his mind, though, and now it blared on the turntable.

He moved to the window to adjust the blinds against the early morning sunlight, but the cord

on the left one jammed. Yanking at it, he recalled how many times he had asked his landlady for a new blind, but she was too cheap to spend a penny; all she wanted to do was collect the rent every month. Most of the sunlight was coming through the jammed blind, and in fury Tracy went to the kitchen and took a knife out of the drawer. When he was finished with that blind, she would have to buy a new one. As he raised the knife to cut the cord, an urgent knocking sounded on his door.

"Mr. Keenan!" his landlady called imperiously.

That was all he needed now, his snarly old landlady. "What is it?" he answered through the closed door.

"Turn that racket down!" she shouted. "You'll wake up my husband!"

As if her husband could hear through his usual drunken stupor, thought Tracy.

"Mr. Keenan, you in there? Open this door!"

"Leave me alone."

"If you don't open the door right now, I'm going to call the police!"

She would, too, and then he would have additional grief to aggravate his misery. "All right, you old bag," he mumbled, striding to the door. He unlocked it and

threw it open. "Do you want to come in and—"

With a horrified shriek she turned to run back downstairs, but in her haste her foot missed the first step and she plunged, rolling over and over, her body making sickening sounds as it thumped down and down. At the bottom she lay still.

Tracy closed his door swiftly and locked it, his head beginning to pound. In his anger he had forgotten he was naked as he went to open the door for her, but hadn't that foolish old woman ever seen a man—and then his eyes dropped to the knife still clutched in his hand. Why, she must have thought he was going to stab her! That stupid old woman must have thought he had gone crazy, to answer the door naked, his face contorted with anger, a knife in his hand, and then to invite her in.

He listened for sounds in the hall. Surely her husband had heard the commotion. By now he would have found her and the police would be arriving momentarily. He would have to get dressed. He shut off the record player, returned the knife to the drawer and went into the bedroom. His headache had reached blinding intensity and he did not know how he would be able to answer any questions.

A knock came to the door before

he could begin the painful process of dressing, so he pulled on a robe and went to the door. He tried to appear suitably shocked as the policemen explained their call and asked their routine questions about Mrs. Brown's fall. He told them he had been taking a bath and playing records and had not heard a thing. He showed them the tub still full, the towels still damp. Satisfied, they went away. Tracy experienced a sudden weakness as he closed the door behind them.

Then it hit him. The itching was gone. He ran his hands swiftly over his arms. His skin felt normal. Just as miraculously, his headache was fading, like a train vanishing down the track. He did not understand it, but he did not care about reasons. He felt wonderful. He was capable of anything now; nothing could faze him. He phoned Claire and told her he would pick her up at one o'clock.

"You must have made a remarkable recovery," she said.

"You might say that. At any rate, I feel like celebrating. See you soon."

He fixed himself a large lunch and ate it leisurely. Now that he was back to normal, he could consider the phenomenon from all sides. This had been his third attack and by far the worst. Each

time it had heralded the death of the person he was with. He had heard of precognition, but never in a physical form like this. He knew that a person's emotions could affect his body, that a great deal of ill health is psychosomatic. Since this was a fact, why wouldn't it follow that a premonition, instead of affecting him through awareness, would manifest itself in certain physical symptoms? But why at this late date? Why now should he be receiving premonitions when he had never had any former experiences of that sort? Maybe it had something to do with his mental state or his general physical condition. He did not know much about extrasensory perception, but he would visit the library at his first opportunity and do some research on the subject. There might be a way he could rid himself of his affliction.

He cleaned up the dishes and got ready to go for Claire. He was sorry about what had happened to Mrs. Brown, but he was grateful to her. If she had not died, the victim might very well have been Claire. For once Mrs. Brown had done something decent for someone, even if it had been unintentional.

The breeze was just right for sailing. Claire, plain though she

was, looked great in a simple two-piece bathing suit. The sun caressed him lovingly and Tracy felt a sense of peace he had never known before. He found himself imagining what his life would be like if he were married to Claire. Maybe her lack of physical beauty was what enhanced her appeal, causing her to make more of an effort than the shallow, lovelier women who did not have to.

"What do you think of your first sail?" he asked.

"It's beautiful! But I feel rather useless. Is there something I can do?"

"You can take the tiller."

"Where?"

He laughed. She had a sense of humor, too. "Sit back there and take hold. Head for the next channel marker."

"I had no idea the bay could be so rough."

"It just seems rough because you're not used to it, Claire. You can swim, I hope."

"Enough to save my life, but that's all."

He got a sudden picture of Fran disappearing beneath the surface, panic distorting her face. If she had relaxed, she would be alive today.

He held the sheet, forcing himself to forget. He would have to replace that tragic memory with a

pleasant one, or he would never be able to enjoy his sailboat again.

"It's awfully warm, don't you think?" asked Claire.

"Feels good to me."

"I'm afraid I'm getting a sunburn. It's a good thing I brought my lotion along."

Tracy felt wonderful to be out on the water again. He raised his face to the sun and the wind. There was something about the salt air—

"It must be this Florida sun," said Claire. "I'm itching like mad!"

Tracy turned to look at the girl. The next moment was like a snapshot; he noticed everything at once, absorbed it instantly and knew the ending to come. Claire was holding her compact mirror in one hand while the other hand was rubbing frantically at her face. There was no hand on the tiller. The boom was swinging toward him but he was trapped in the snapshot and could not move. When it struck his head he felt no pain but was suddenly unable to think; he could only see. He hit the water, rolled slowly over and up again in time to see the mast descending on him. He could hear her screaming nearby and he could see her in that last second, scratching furiously as she tread water near the overturned sailboat.

There is a particular "party" of some length where a car, a shirt and a modicum of water are indispensable.



FROM the passenger side of the front seat inside the new peach-colored car, Truman Beach thought his sister-in-law a pathetic figure as she watched their departure. True, she was a physically handsome woman in middle years; true, she

had come from hardy Texas stock; but she was too subdued, too dependent on, and too cowed by the man who now piloted the car out of Amarillo. Truman knew an in-

stant of sorrow for Laura Sue Beach. In a sense, it was too bad her husband had to die. On the other hand, that death might awaken her, and she might discover she was adequately capable of coping with freedom.

Only time and the death would tell.

The instant he slid inside the car Truman had realized this warm March day was to bring the initial giant step in his scheming bid for lifelong wealth and independence. He'd had the *feeling*, in spite of Laura Sue standing in the gateway of her luxurious brick home. Now he tingled inside, but he was very careful to disguise the excitement as Omar—age fifty, fleshy, attired in western clothing, and sniffing, ah, yes, constantly sniffing; sinus trouble, you know—piloted them west on Route 66 and across the High Plains. Truman stared at the flat, brown land without seeing it. Ahead was New Mexico's poor highways and the mountains. He was bored, but he felt satisfaction when he envisioned the mountains. Somehow he knew they were to be Omar's deathbed.

"When you-all gonna dig your boot heels into some sod, boy?" Omar finally asked.

Truman grimaced as his brother used a soft white thumb to push a Stetson back on his head. Omar, a

native Californian, liked to convey the impression he had been born in a Texas saddle, and the facade irked Truman. Omar would sell beef to Red China before he'd climb into a saddle on a live horse.

Truman said flatly, "I don't wear boots."

"You-all should, boy. Good for the feet, and they make you feel like a special kind of man."

Truman continued to stare at the dry land. At twenty-two, he had a well-proportioned, hard body, dark, handsome features and white teeth. His tastes and pleasures were expensive. Today he wore a gray suit that had a sheen, a pink shirt with white collar and cuffs, and custom-made, soft leather shoes. The third-born of the Beach boys, he had none of the traits of Omar, his eldest brother, who had from conception, it seemed, known from where his cake was frosted; or of Elmo, the second eldest, who was quick to assume control of everything assigned, relegated or acquired, and was equally quick to command, demand and produce. In California Truman was considered hippie, "the wild Beach." He was acutely aware of the reputation. He liked it, and wore it as if it were an accolade.

Now he settled lower in the car seat and said, "I already feel special, Omar. I'm a son of Alexan-

der Beach." He thumped his chest.

"Cept you-all don't act it."

"I don't act like the other sons-of-Beach, you mean?"

Omar sniffed. "I'm carryin' my share of the load. So's Elmo."

"At least Elmo has sense enough to fake it out in a paneled Oklahoma City office."

"In the oil end of this operation, boy, a paneled office is standard equipment. There ain't nobody fak-in' anything out. Me'n Elmo keep an eye on things for Pa. I keep an eye on his ranch interests and Elmo keeps an eye on the oil fields. What are you-all keepin' an eye on—other than the roll of the dice, that is?"

"Are we going to fight all the way to Colorado, Omar?"

"No."

"Then leave the dice and the girls out of this."

"So far Alex hasn't bowed his neck, boy, but that's pride; strictly pride. Our father is proud of himself, proud of the Beach name, and he has reason to be. He's built an empire. He wants that empire to continue to flourish, under Beach management, and it can if we all pitch in. But Father is tiring, Truman. He's getting damn sick and tired of waiting for you to grab some reins. It would hurt him deeply to have to cast off a son, but he'll do it."

"Is that why he sent me to you this time, Omar? So you could warn me?"

"Colorado is good country."

"The hell with Colorado."

"The Spangles is a big spread. You take all of the old man's holdings—Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado—and the Spangles is the best spread. It can be yours. All you have to do is—"

"Buy a pair of boots, walk around slapping the rumps of livestock and take on the smell of a cow. No thanks, brother."

"You'd please Alex. Can't you do that, his last few years?"

"Why should I start to please him now? From the instant I was conceived I've been a burr under his big toe, the kid who wasn't supposed to be because Alex hadn't planned me. Worse, I'm the living memory of a woman who died in childbirth. He's never going to forgive me for being born and killing her, Omar. I learned that much about him years ago."

"He loved our mother deeply," Omar said simply.

"Why didn't we fly up to the ranch? Lord, this is barren country." Truman put his head against the back of the seat and closed his eyes. "Wake me when we get into the mountains. I've been out of California two days and I've already forgotten what a tree looks

like. What wonderful country."

They dropped off the High Plains and rolled through Tucumcari. Omar turned the car northwest. Truman dozed. They entered the mountains, angled toward Taos. Halfway up one mountain, Omar found a wide area beside the winding highway and braked into it. He left the car and stretched his leg muscles. Truman awoke, joined his brother. Omar sniffed loudly. "Smell the air. Ain't it somethin'?"

They stood side by side on the rim of a deep canyon. Below were huge boulders and the tops of trees. Truman's mind was busy with the threat conveyed by Omar. So Alex was finally losing patience with him. It seemed Truman was making his move none too soon.

He shuffled. His foot brushed a rock. He inspected the parking area. It was littered with rocks. Any number would fit his palm. His heartbeat quickened, but he managed to appear casual as he walked around to the highway side of the car. To his left, he could see the highway winding up to a pass. To his right, the road dropped away and disappeared around a jutting cliff. He and Omar seemed to be alone in a tiny world of their own.

Omar still stood on the rim of the canyon when Truman walked around the car and stared at his

brother's back. Omar was attempting to light a cigarette against the wind. Truman picked up a large rock, glanced up and down the highway, saw nothing. He smashed the rock down against Omar's Stetson, then caught him and kept him from pitching into the canyon.

Truman worked quickly and as if he had planned each move. He pushed and wedged his brother behind the steering wheel of the car, then fastened the seat belt below the fleshy man's paunch. Omar was breathing laboriously as Truman reached in and started the motor. He surveyed the highway again—nothing. He put Omar's booted foot on the accelerator. The motor picked up. Truman turned the front wheels and snapped the gear lever. The big car lurched over the rim of the canyon, tottered briefly, then spilled out of sight.

Truman leaped to the rim and watched the car tumble crazily down through the rocks and trees. Suddenly it burst into flames. Truman cried out with the explosion, then a flash of light in the corner of his eye made him crouch. He stared up the mountain highway. Sun glinted spasmodically against metal. A car was approaching, coming down from the pass. Truman closed his eyes and shot off the rim in a low, racing dive. He hit the ground flat and hard, slid



face down. Rocks tore his clothing, ripped his skin. It seemed he would never stop sliding. He cried out. Abruptly, he was immobile.

He carefully opened his eyes. His vision was blurred. He blinked rapidly. The blurr remained. Fear built in him. Had he somehow

damaged his eyesight in his reckless plunge? He used the back of one hand to wipe his eyes. His vision cleared briefly before blurring again, but he knew relief. It was blood, sliding down from a slash in his forehead, that hampered his vision. He lay quietly, to avoid slid-

ing again. From above him came the sound of a braking car, the slam of doors, then human exclamations. He wanted to look. He thought about the car burning below, remembering the initial burst of flames. He hadn't counted on the car exploding, but the explosion was good. It cinched Omar's death. Truman awaited rescue.

No member of the vacationing Illinois family had witnessed the slaying. The two children had been playing in the rear of the station wagon, and their father had been concentrating on navigating the mountain descent. Only the mother "thought" she saw the car plunge from the highway, but she wasn't sure. They had been too far away.

Truman sat quietly in the small town police station. He was satisfied. The Illinois family had been thanked and dismissed. Occasionally, he pressed a thumb and forefinger against the strip of adhesive tape that covered the forehead slash. He had not been seriously injured; a few scrapes, bruises and minor cuts.

The two New Mexico state policemen who had been summoned to the scene of the accident and the small town police chief were gentlemen who looked on Truman as being "the luckiest man in New Mexico today" as he told how

Omar had fallen asleep at the wheel of the car.

"I was dozing," Truman said, "but I jerked awake. You know how it happens? Something—you're not sure what—alerts you?"

"We know," admitted one of the state policemen.

"Well, I saw what was happening. I saw Omar asleep. I yelled and grabbed for the steering wheel, but it was already too late. We were going off the highway, so I bailed out. Thank God I didn't have my seat belt fastened."

The officer trio nodded, then the police chief asked, "How long you figure it'll be 'fore your other brother flies in from Oklahoma City?"

"Elmo said he would be here by three o'clock this afternoon. I think I will get a room and rest, if it's all right with you gentlemen. Didn't I see a motel on the edge of town as we were driving in?"

After the official accident and death reports were completed, the state policemen took Truman to the small motel. In his room, he stretched out on a double bed and slept peacefully until Elmo pounded on the door. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, precisely. Elmo was running true to form.

Elmo also was a combination of surprise and dismay and nervous excitement. "How could you

sleep?" he admonished. "How can you be so—so nonchalant about what's happened?"

"Omar is dead, Elmo. Neither of us can do anything about it."

Elmo was a man of medium height, forty-eight years, and had a large, balding head, thick shoulders and workman's hands. Assigned by their father to oversee the Beach oil interests, with characteristic Elmo vigor he had plunged into the task as if it were to be his dying chore—which it could be. He had gone into the fields, learned the business from the core to the bank, and in the process had lost a wife and two sons.

Marie had divorced him after nineteen years of marriage. Too much interest in oil, too little interest in Marie and sons, she'd said. She flew to Reno with the sons, obtained the divorce, then flew on to Honolulu. Elmo had gone after her repeatedly in the years since the breakup, but she was an intelligent and determined woman. She saw through his false promises of turning from oil to domesticity and she steadfastly refused to allow herself and the boys to be caught again in an Elmo tide.

The divorce was the only depressing Elmo had ever known. He never had accepted it. On paper, in a county courthouse, he was legally separated from his wife and off-

spring, but not in his mind. Mentally, they still belonged to him; physically, they did not.

Truman, on the other hand, admired the woman who lived in Honolulu, delighted in her declared independence. She was the only other one among all of the Beaches—name acquired or name inherited—who stood tall with him.

Now he said, "This is just another one of those things that neither you nor Alex nor anyone can do anything about, Elmo. You have to live with life, and you have to live with death. You cannot always predict, organize or control either."

Elmo's anger was obvious. Large pink splotches appeared in his cheeks. He snapped, "You are cold, Truman. You have no feelings. You don't understand—"

"I understand life and death. Both exist, like marriage and divorce."

"You didn't have to say that!"

"Shall we pick up Omar's body and return it to Amarillo?"

"Father said to bring him home!"

"Omar has a *wife* in Amarillo. Laura Sue."

"All right! We fly there, *then* we fly home!"

The undertaker at the small town's only funeral home thought it a bit "irregular." He could see, by looking at the two Beach men, that he was missing out on a tidy profit,

but since the state police had "authorized" the removal of the charred remains, he helped load the grisly cloth sack aboard the twin-engined plane and watched in silence as the plane disappeared into the blue sky. The brothers, Elmo in the pilot's seat, flew into Amarillo in silence. There they picked up Laura Sue, who had collapsed after Truman's telephone call and had since been revived by a neighbor, and logged the flight to southern California. Put down and finally stopped on a private airstrip near a stone and glass mansion of Moroccan design that sat majestically on a cliff above the sea, they were met by a shiny funeral coach and by Alexander Beach, who vacated a glistening, chauffeured limousine. Alexander, ignoring the weeping Laura Sue, immediately accosted Truman, clutching him by the shoulders.

"How—in heaven's name—could you let it happen?" he demanded.

"By dozing," Truman said flatly, and it was in that moment Laura Sue Beach collapsed and died on the airstrip.

"Heart attack," said the pronouncing physician.

There was a double funeral in the private burial grounds on the Beach estate, and that night Truman had to have a game. The deaths and burials had built a ten-

sion in him. He needed a release.

On public records, Gustav Morris was the sole owner and operator of a string of opulent restaurants through southern California. Among the more knowledgeable citizenry—which included sundry police, attorneys, judges, fellow hoods and, most important, well-heeled John Does—he was one of the state's biggest gamblers, a barrel of a man, with several dewlaps and the shiny face of a scrubbed cherub.

The action took place in a vast open room above one of the restaurants. There were five other obviously wealthy men in the game, but Truman, as usual, concentrated on rolling the dice and betting against Gustav. It was an appetite with him. He'd take anyone's money, but it was with a particular relish that he took Gustav's. That night he won \$3,485.

Gustav seemed in a holiday frame of mind when the game broke up at dawn. He chuckled and clapped Truman's shoulder. "What else are you going to take from me, Tru?" he asked conversationally.

"Nikki?"

The girl had been serving them drinks all night. A wholesome red-head in a white, severe, off-the-shoulder gown, she belonged in Gustav's stable.

He shrugged and motioned her over. No words passed between them. She waited patiently while Truman continued to fold the money and put it into his pockets.

Gustav said, "Heard about your brother and his wife."

"Those things happen, Gus."

"Yeah. Accidents. More people get killed in accidents. It's a damn shame how careless people can be."

Truman stiffened. Was there an innuendo? He wanted to look at Gustav Morris, look deep into the man's eyes, but he did not dare. He took Nikki's arm and piloted her toward the door. Oppie and Shutter were there, waiting the signal from Gustav to open the door; Oppie, a suave buzzard of twenty-six, a sadistic killer; Shutter, a heavily tanned young man who could be grandiose and was reputed to be an expert with a salacious camera. Truman feared both. Oppie, expressionless, opened the door. Shutter smiled and bowed departure.

When Truman arrived at the Beach mansion at four o'clock that warm afternoon, he was drained physically and emotionally and in no mood to cope with anyone, but his father called to him from an umbrellaed sun lounge beside the glistening swimming pool.

Truman winced and cursed in silence. Nikki had left him mentally lethargic. If he had been alert, he

would have been watching; he would have avoided Alexander. Now the old man swung up into a sitting position on the edge of the lounge and closed a book of poetry. He was seventy, long and massive in body, with thinning white hair, white bushy eyebrows, a large nose and a mind honed to saber-edged sharpness.



He looked at Truman with a wisdom born and supplemented by years. "You're tired, son."

Truman shrugged, lit a cigarette, waited, relieved. His father always used one of two approaches with him; he was either soft-spoken, calm, receptive; mildly chastising, or hard as cobalt, angry, demanding, domineering.

"Elmo is flying back to Okla-

homa City tonight," Alexander Beach said gently.

"So?"

A pinch of agitation squeezed down the corners of the old man's eyes, but his voice remained steady. "There is some business we should talk about, the three of us."

"I've been thirty hours without sleep, Father."

"We waited for you last night, son."

"I had some business of my own to take care of."

"I'm sure ours was, and is, more important."

"Sorry. I'm going to bed."

"Son?" The old man's voice had hardened, his eyes narrowed. "Your brother Omar is dead. That death leaves a breach in our—"

"Father, I'm bushed."

Truman expected an angry deluge to spill on him all the way into the mansion. None came. He stopped just inside the door and looked back. His father sat as if stone, and Truman knew that he was staring without seeing.

The next morning he found Elmo departed and himself in a plunging frame of mind. He accosted his father bluntly over the breakfast table at poolside. "Is this the day for me to move out?" he asked.

"There is no such day in our lives," Alexander said curtly.

"Odd, I suspect there will be."

"Can't you settle down, boy? Can't you—"

"Am I out?"

"No!"

"Then I plan to spend the day at the beach."

"Spend a *week* at the beach! Gambol away your life!"

Truman didn't plan to gambol—or gamble. Rather, he now saw a necessity to accelerate the pace of his long-range plan. He was running much closer to estrangement with his father than he had thought.

He met Nikki at the public beach. They lolled away the day, and he made a date to meet her the next day. He wooed her carefully, and she was susceptible. Truman asked her to leave Gustav's stable.

She said simply, "I'd like to, but I can't, Tru. He isn't ready to let me go."

That night Truman took his second big plunge. He rode the dice on Gustav's table, and at dawn he picked up \$7,000 of Gustav's money. "One more roll of the dice, Gus."

The gambler squinted as Truman returned the \$7,000 to the table. "You're hot, Tru. White-hot."

"You cover with Nikki."

"Huh?"

"I want Nikki."

"You're covered, you screwball."
Truman rolled an eleven.

That afternoon on the sand of the beach, she told him, "I'll do anything for you, Tru."

He kissed her, grinning. He could trust her, for the present. That night he displayed the photostat copy of the letter he had pilfered from his father's wall safe. The letter had been written by Marie Beach upon her divorce from Elmo and had been addressed to her father-in-law. In it she had vented wrath upon the old man. Truman had no idea why Alexander had kept the letter—unless he saw in it some future vendetta—but a copy now was to serve a purpose. Typewritten, the letter contained Marie's longhand signature and it was this signature that Truman asked Nikki to master.

She was hesitant until he said, "A family joke—and a trip to Honolulu for you."

She began practicing the signature immediately.

"When you have it down pat, I will type a letter and address an envelope. All you have to do is sign the letter "Marie," take it to Honolulu and mail it."

"Lordy, your kind of jokes are expensive, Tru! Are you going with me?"

"No. You stay a week, ten days, two weeks. Enjoy yourself. I'll be

waiting for you when you return."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Are you going to ask me to marry you someday, Tru?"

"Someday."

His scheme could involve making Nikki his wife. He hadn't considered that prospect but he'd have to do something to keep her quiet. Marriage might be a pleasant answer; far more pleasant than her death, certainly. He would decide later.

The day he put her aboard the jetliner he also announced to his father, "Alex, something has come over me. Don't ask me to explain it. I can't. But all of a sudden I want to become involved. I want to be a part of Beach Enterprises. I want to go to Oklahoma City and learn from Elmo."

Neither Alexander nor Elmo pretended to understand. Alexander wagged his head at what seemed a miracle, but Elmo's world of predictability was not totally shattered until he received the typewritten letter from his former wife, asking him to come to Honolulu to reclaim her and their sons.

"Can I fly out with you?" asked Truman.

"Let's go!" exclaimed his excited brother.

Elmo's letdown in Honolulu was everything Truman could have

hoped for, after a telephone call to Marie announcing their arrival. Marie was astounded. She had not written a letter. She never would write such a letter. Wasn't Elmo ever going to quit trying? Was she being forced into retaining an attorney again to prevent harrassment?

The brothers caught the next flight back to the mainland. Elmo rode in depressed silence. Halfway across the Pacific, Truman asked for the letter. Listless, Elmo allowed him to remove it from an inside coat pocket, and Truman tore the letter and the envelope into tiny pieces and disposed of the pieces.

"Better to have no reminder," Truman told his brother. Then he put his head against the back of the seat and slept.

They went to the California mansion on the cliff. Alexander Beach was immediately worried. "He's down, Truman. Way down."

"It was a helluva shock, father. He has never accepted the divorce, you know."

"He's been depressed before, but not like this."

"A good night's sleep will help."

"If he sleeps."

They sat opposite each other at poolside. From Truman's slouched position in the chair, he could see the light in the second floor win-

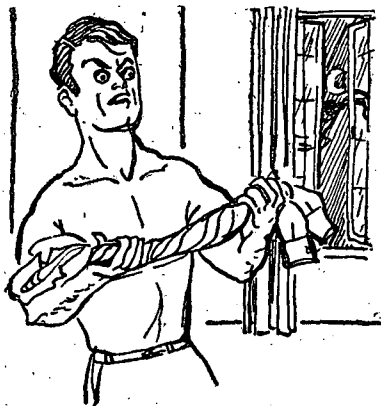
dow. No shadow of a pacing Elmo moved back and forth across the light. There was only the limb of the tree, the limb that angled diagonally across the rectangle.

The waiting was the bad part. Truman perspired in spite of a breeze that swept in from the ocean. The light in Elmo's window finally went out. Alexander finally left his book of poetry and retired. Truman went to his darkened room where he chain-smoked but was careful to dispose of the cigarette butts in the bathroom rather than use an ashtray. He could not leave any sign of wakefulness.

He made his move at two-thirty in the morning. Taking the dress shirt he had been wearing, he left the bedroom on bare feet and walked silently through the second floor stillness. He entered Elmo's room without knocking, then stood with his shoulder blades pressed against the door, holding his breath while he stared at the lumpy figure in the bed. Slowly he twisted the shirt into one taut length, then crossed to the bed. Elmo was belly down, his face turned away. Truman stretched the twisted shirt, hesitated, then whipped it down under his brother's head, formed a quick loop and pulled tight. Elmo writhed upward, but little more than a gurgle came from his throat. Truman jammed a knee against his

spine and held the shirt loop tight until Elmo quit struggling.

Truman put his ear against Elmo's lips, heard nothing. He tested for a pulse, found none. Quickly he stripped the bed, yanking the bottom sheet out from under the inert form. Using the two sheets, he fashioned a rope with a loop in one end. Then he pulled Elmo to the window, leaned out and knotted the opposite end of the sheet rope



to the tree limb. When he finally managed to push Elmo's body through the window opening, the limb creaked protestingly against the sudden dropped weight. Truman held his breath. The limb did not snap. Elmo's body swayed.

Truman took his shirt and returned to his room. Another possible heir to the Beach fortune was gone.

Alexander wanted the suicide to

remain a secret among a select few, but neither the Beach family doctor nor the investigating officials would concur. In bitter return, Alexander refused to cooperate in the investigation. He told authorities his son had been in a depressed state of mind, but that was all he revealed. He swore Truman to secrecy about the letter from Marie—which was not difficult to do—and he would not say why Elmo had been depressed.

"My son is dead, gentlemen. He will be buried. That is where it ends." The old man stuck by his guns and won, but he was curious, too.

"The letter," he mused after the funeral. "Why would that woman write such a letter, give a man hope, then wreck him?"

"There wasn't a letter, father," Truman announced.

The old man waited, his look narrowed.

"It was pure fantasy on Elmo's part," Truman continued, manufacturing as he went along. "Something in his mind snapped. I don't know what brought it on, what triggered it, but about a week ago he called me into his office and he took this folded piece of paper from a stamped and addressed envelope. He told me Marie wanted to return to him and that he was going to Honolulu to get her. He

asked me to read her letter. There was nothing on the paper, Father. It was blank. I got a look at the envelope. I think Elmo had addressed it to himself and stamped it. I didn't see a postal cancellation mark.

"Well, I didn't know what to do. I wanted to bring him here immediately, but he insisted on this trip to Honolulu. Finally I decided to humor him. I thought there was a chance he might snap out of his delusion during the flight, so I agreed to go with him. Unfortunately, he did not. Then, when we arrived in Honolulu I got him to call Marie. Naturally, she was astounded, and naturally Elmo was deflated. I got him on the next plane and brought him here. I made a bad decision, Father; more than one, it seems."

The old man remained silent for a long time before he left his chair and poured two snifters of brandy. "I think, Truman," he said gently, "I would have made the same decision under identical circumstances. I think I would have attempted to help Elmo in the quietest and most humane way I thought possible at the moment."

"I'm not asking sympathy or forgiveness."

"Nor am I giving either, son. All I'm saying to you is, we carry on, you and I. We're the last of the

Beaches, and much lies ahead."

"Are you positive you want me? I'm green."

"You can learn, and from here. There will be no more Beaches in the field. Everything you need to know you will learn from me, right here in this house."

"Well . . ."

"You have to make a home for that pretty little redheaded woman of yours, don't you? Incidentally, where is she?"

"Father," Truman said with a slow grin he hoped covered his surprise, "is there anything you don't know?"

"I know her name is Nikki. I know you got her away from Gustav Morris. I don't know *how* you got her, but—"

"I won her," Truman explained. "She is a good girl, Father. I think I love her."

"Then marry her! Where is she?"

"Portland. She has a sister there. She decided to live with her sister while I was in Oklahoma City. She didn't want to remain here for—well, for various reasons."

"Get her back here, son!"

"I'll fly up there tomorrow."

"That's the way to do things, boy!"

Gustav Morris paid off handsomely again that night, and Truman accepted perfunctorily until

Gustav winked and said, "A death in the Beach family seems to mean luck for you, Tru. Maybe you should try poker, too. Some say death runs in the cards. Others say—"

"I do all right with the dice," Truman said sullenly.

"Hey, hey!" Gustav clapped his shoulder. "No hard feelings, huh? Nothin' meant by the patter."

"I've lost two brothers within four months, Gus. Something like that makes a guy edgy."

"Sure, sure, pal. Hey, I've got a new little gal, Wanda. I can have her here in thirty minutes if you like."

"No thanks."

"Nikki, eh?"

"Nikki."

"I ain't seen her around lately."

"She's around."

"Yeah, well, see yuh. Say good-night to Tru, boys."

Oppie opened the door, said nothing. Shutter smiled, bowed and said, "Good night, Mr. Beach."

Truman flew up to San Francisco later that morning and called Nikki back to the mainland. She knew about Elmo's death. The Beach name was big enough to make at least a small item in the Honolulu paper. She was confused, a bit worried. Then Truman swept her off her feet. "How about if we get married in the next couple of

days, doll? Mrs. Truman Beach."
"Lordy!"

It wasn't until they were on the flight to southern California that he became serious. "You've been in Portland, honey, visiting a sister. That's the way it has to be."

She looked puzzled.

"The letter—it was a sick joke to begin with. Father must never know about it."

"Is that what . . . is that what made your brother commit . . . I mean . . ."

"No. No one knows why he did it. He didn't get the letter. I managed to intercept it."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "I thought maybe it was the letter that—"

"No. I managed to intercept it and destroy it. No one except you and me knows it existed. And no one must ever know, Nikki."

"Well, I'm not going to tell anyone! Ever!"

"Things just happened to work out badly. My idea of a joke in the first place, then Elmo imagining he had received a letter from Marie and becoming ill—"

"*Imagining* he received a letter!"

Truman nodded somberly. "I still can't believe it myself, the guy coming up with a delusion like that." He told her the same story he had told his father, then added, "How do you figure something

like that? Here, we're sending the guy a letter but before he receives it, he goes off his rocker and *imagines* he has heard from Marie."

Truman knew this was the critical point. If Nikki accepted his fabrications she would go on living. If she continued to probe . . .

"Golly, can we just forget this whole mess, Tru?"

"Sure, baby. Father says it ended when we buried Elmo."

"He won't ever question me? He won't—"

"That's why I told him you've been in Portland, baby. You are not involved unless you involve yourself."

"Whee! I don't know why, but I feel terribly relieved."

"Honey, you're going to make a good wife."

She smiled and purred, "And a rich wife, Tru?"

"A very rich wife, doll."

"I've lived for this moment."

They were married in July and flew to Europe where they honeymooned for three months and Truman found Nikki to be expensively delightful. She didn't want to return to the United States. She wanted to live on the Riviera forever.

He smiled condescendingly. "Perhaps someday, honey."

"After your father is dead?"

The question seemed innocent,

natural; after all, the old man *was* getting along in years, but Truman slid his wife a sidelong glance from behind black sunglasses. "Perhaps."

She continued to pack the suitcase. "Will he leave everything to you, Tru? His fortune?"

"Why not?"

She shrugged, smiled suddenly, kissed him impulsively. "I like your father," she said.

"He likes you, too, doll."

They returned to the mansion in late October. Alexander greeted them warmly. His handshake for Truman was firm and he kissed Nikki's cheek with boyish enthusiasm. The old man kept an arm around his daughter-in-law's waist all the way into the house and Truman noticed she was coquettishly receptive. That night, in their bed, he was mildly chastising.

Nikki laughed throatily and curled against him. "Is this jealousy showing, my love?"

"Hardly, but—"

"Now that we have returned I want a car of my own, that's all; and the way you have been talking about our money supply lately—"

"It was an expensive honeymoon, doll."

"So you've said. Repeatedly."

"We're short at the moment."

"When will we be long again?"

"I'll speak to father in the morning."

"I want my own car. If not from you, then from Alexander."

"He'll refuse you."

"Will he?" She turned from Truman, rolled onto her other side. "I don't think he will," she said confidently.

It occurred to Truman in that moment that he might have erred. Perhaps he should have killed her instead of marrying her.

He breakfasted alone with his father the following morning. When he asked for money, Alexander didn't seem surprised, but he shook his head. "Things are a bit tight at the moment, son. There isn't much cash available. We aren't going to go hungry, understand, but—"

"Father, I'm serious! When *will* there be cash?"

"Are you prepared to earn your bread now?"

Truman shot to his feet. "So that's it!"

Alexander remained calm. "No, that isn't it. I'm being truthful when I tell you cash is tight, but I also think . . ."

Truman did not remain to hear the old man's thoughts. He stomped from the patio and walked down the cliff path to the beach. Frustrated, he scuffed sand viciously as he walked. The handwriting was on the wall now. The old man had to die, and soon.

Truman stared out across the waves and schemed. The plot came to him as if it had been harbored in his mind too long. He smiled. Then he remembered Nikki's demand for a car. He frowned. He needed some quick cash.

"I won you, baby," he told her that afternoon. "Tonight I'll win you a car."

"Gustav?"

He was confident, and the confidence swelled as he won methodically from Gustav Morris. Then the dice soured. He lost on five consecutive rolls, and he knew he had suddenly lost the touch. Gustav knew too. Across the table a tiny smile had become chiseled in his fat face, his eyes were greedy slits and his chubby fingers worked swiftly in collecting the money.

Truman wanted to quit when he was even, but Gustav was like a prowling jungle cat who had had a smell of trembling prey. He flipped a \$100 bill onto the felt, held the dice near an ear and listened to the click in his hand. "Take it, Tru."

It was an order. Truman obeyed. Gustav rolled a seven.

Truman lost consistently. He went through the money on his person and wrote four checks. He was sweating profusely when he said, "That's it, Gus. I'm cleaned."

Gustav said, "It's dawn." He counted out \$5,000 and placed it on

the table. He gave Truman the dice. "But a Beach IOU is always good in my house. Five thou—you can recoup on the night."

Truman scribbled the IOU and swiftly rolled the dice. They turned up an eleven. He snatched up the paper but Gustav had put another \$5,000 on the table. "You can't do it again."

Truman rolled: ace, deuce; then three times more for \$5,000 each roll.

Gustav called a halt. "It seems," he murmured, "you need a death in the family to be lucky. When can I expect to collect, Tru-boy? Later this morning?"

"You'll get your money!"

"Easy, Tru, easy. I know I'll get my money. The point is, *when?*"

Truman turned to the door. Oppie and Shutter, stonefaced, blocked his exit. Behind him, Gustav repeated, "When?"

"This afternoon!" he said in desperation. "I'll come here! Two o'clock! In the restaurant downstairs!"

"I'll be expecting you. Oppie, Shutter, show the gentleman out."

When Truman awoke that afternoon, he felt drugged; but Nikki looked refreshed and radiant. "I have my car," she announced. "I told you I'd get it."

Somehow he wasn't surprised.

Listlessly, he asked, "How, doll?"

"Your father."

He squeezed his eyes with his fingers.

"But I phoned Gustav first," she said, as if to make amends. "I phoned him early this morning. You lost an awful lot of money, Truman. How are you going to pay Gustav?"

"The same way you got your car, minx."

She laughed softly at his retort. "I wonder."

"Get away from me. Leave me alone."

Nikki, suddenly somber, lit a cigarette, walked to a window, stood looking out. "Your father is at the pool," she said.

"So?"

She faced him. "So I think it's time we have a little chat."

"About what?"

"About us. About our future."

"The honeymoon is over, doll?"

"We need money, Tru. We need lots of money. But it's all sitting out there at the pool, reading poetry."

He sat up slowly in the bed. "And?"

"How do we get access to it?"

"You're making this sound like some kind of conspiracy, baby."

"Haven't you conspired against him all of your life? Haven't you—"

"I'm not listening. Knock it."

"No, I won't knock it. I've planted myself in the center of your once-private world. I've—"

"You've also heard of plants being uprooted, I assume?"

"Not this one, Tru-baby. I know too much."

"You . . . *what?*"

"I'm the girl who learned to copy a signature. Remember?"

He left the bed angrily.

"Don't," she said calmly. "I'll scream."

"Honey, I brought you here, and I can throw you out."

"Probably," she admitted, "but not without a helluva furor. Your father is suspicious, Truman. He's been probing me, gently, subtly. Why do you think he bought me the car? He wants me on his side."

"Probing about what?"

"He didn't believe that story you cooked up about your brother Elmo and an imaginary letter. Frankly, I didn't either. I smelled hanky-panky in the Beach household. That's why I'm here. It's why I married you. I'm not naive, you know, darling. I was one of Gustav's girls too long to—"

"What has Alex been asking you?"

"He thinks your brother might have actually received a letter. I, too, think he did, the one I mailed from Honolulu. I think it may

have been what triggered him into suicide. Was it, Truman—or *was Elmo even a suicide?*"

"Doll—"

"It's time you leveled with me. Your father has discovered that I don't have a sister in Portland—or anywhere else. He's checked."

"Baby—"

"Square with me, Truman! I'm your wife! I'm as money-hungry as you are! Do you think I give a damn about that old man out there at the pool? He can give me life, the kind of life I want, but I don't want it with *him*! I want it with *you*! What have you done, Truman? Did you force your brother into committing suicide or did you—"

"Okay, dammit, I killed them both!"

"Both?"

"Omar and Elmo! I'm the sole surviving heir, and now I'm going to kill Father! Halloween night! You're not shocked, I see."

"The estate? All of the estate will be yours, Truman?"

He shrugged.

"Tell me your plan."

He laid it out for her. It didn't matter. She no longer was a threat to him. She wouldn't talk. She wanted the Beach wealth as much as he did. She would scheme with him. She saw rainbows, too. The only difference was, he had a sur-

prise at the end of the rainbow for her.

The idea of an old-fashioned Halloween party to introduce his new daughter-in-law to his circle of friends appealed to Alexander Beach and he pitched into the preparations with vigor. There were hats and masks and costumes to be purchased. There was a human skeleton—to dangle in the front room of the mansion—to be borrowed from an old friend at a university. There was the paper donkey to be put on a wall, its tail to be pinned with hilarity at the party. There was a galvanized washtub to be found, apples to be bought. Finally, there was the party, the guests arriving, the introductions, the saving of the apple-bobbing contest, to be held on the grass near the patio, until last.

Truman, picking the moment when all of the guests were noisily assisting a blindfolded Nikki in pinning the tail on the donkey, drew his father outside to check the apples in the tub of water.

"Are there enough apples or should I dump in more?" he wanted to know.

Alexander Beach laughed heartily. "There are only twenty guests, son, and you must have at least thirty apples in that tub."

Truman took him swiftly. He

caught his father's arm and jerked it up his back. With his free hand, he slapped the back of Alexander's neck and jackknifed him forward. The old man's chortle became lost in a bubbling gurgle as he went down on his knees and Truman forced his face into the tub of water. Truman held him until he was sure he was dead, then he shouldered the body and carried it down the cliff path and pitched it into the ocean. Next, he lured Nikki out on the pretext of a leak in the tub. He drowned her and moved her to the Pacific, too.

The discovery of the corpses was made by an elderly couple who had succumbed to moonlight and beach and a brief reversion to youth. The elderly woman was screaming shrilly as they approached the house.

The minions of the law and the medical people were quietly efficient and polite. Only the newspapermen clamored, but they soon were put beyond the estate boundaries, and a solemn, weathered Sheriff Jackson took Truman in tow.

"The press." Jackson pulled at a long nose on a long face. "Always excited."

Truman, remembering the sheriff from the investigation of Elmo's death, was apprehensive.

"My men will be finished with your guests soon. They are being sent home," Jackson said. "Is there someplace we can talk?"

"Tonight? Can't the talking wait?" Truman put a whine in his tone. "Anyway, what is there to talk about? They're dead. My wife and my father. They're—"

"I realize the tremendous loss, lad, but there are a couple of things . . ." They stepped onto the swimming pool apron. Jackson stopped at two chairs, looked around. They were alone. "Can we sit here?" He sat in one of the chairs, lit a fresh cigar, then looked directly at Truman. "Well, what do you think happened on the beach?"

"How would I know?"

"One went into the water, got into trouble? The second party plunged in to assist the first party?"

"What else?"

"They both were fully dressed. How many people go in for a swim fully clothed?"

Truman tensed with misgiving. He saw immediately where, in his haste, he could have erred.

"Or perhaps they were intoxicated," Jackson suggested. "I understand drinks were being served this evening."

"Neither was intoxicated, Sheriff."

Jackson bobbed his head. Truman's answer seemed to have con-

formed with something he already knew. He drew on the cigar, blew smoke at the night sky. "Were your father and your wife especially close, lad? One of the guests mentioned that your father recently purchased a new car for your wife. I believe it was within the last couple of days."

"It was."

"An expensive car."

"Father, as you know, could afford expensive whims."

"That's what the purchase was? A whim?"

Truman shrugged, kept his eyes averted from the sheriff. He liked the line of questioning now. It opened the door to an impression he had hoped to create.

"Son," Jackson said gently, "we can close this matter much quicker if—"

"All right. They were close."

"How close? Were your wife and your father having an affair?"

"Ugly-sounding, isn't it?"

"Were they?"

"She was milking him and the old fool didn't know how to cope with her."

"That doesn't sound like the Alexander Beach I've heard about."

"The Alexander Beach of a year ago and the Alexander Beach of today were two entirely different men, Sheriff. Age finally caught up with him. You didn't know Nikki,

either—how she was or what—”

“Yes I did. She used to be one of Gustav Morris’ girls.”

“I see. Well, I made a terrible mistake when I married her.”

“Do you think there could have been foul play down there on the beach tonight?”

“I do. My father was a moral man. Philandering was offensive to him.”

“Do you think he killed her?”

“I think he drowned her and got into trouble in the process. Father no longer had his strength and agility of a few years ago.”

“Uh-huh. On the other hand, you could have murdered both of them, son.”

“I could have,” Truman said.

Jackson looked surprised. “Did you?”

“No, but under the circumstances, you had to think that sooner or later.”

Jackson grunted, then he stood suddenly. “You’re right, I had to. Well, I guess that wraps things up for tonight. I’m sorry this had to happen. Tragedy has hit you Beaches hard in the last six months.”

“I’ll be available when you want to talk to me again, Sheriff.”

“Thank you.”

Truman did not sleep that night. He dozed intermittently, but most of the night he worried. Sitting up

in the bed, smoking, staring at the side formerly occupied by Nikki, he pondered Sheriff Jackson, the future. Just how sharp was the sheriff? Truman had surmised from the beginning that he might be suspected as a murderer, but he also had anticipated that he could offset that suspicion by building a strong background for murder-suicide or murder and accidental drowning. Now he was not at all sure about what Sheriff Jackson—or a jury—might accept.

The summons of the telephone startled him out of fitful sleep at nine o’clock in the morning and Gustav Morris’ slick voice grated against his nerve ends. “Tru-boy? I hear there are fewer Beaches today.”

“Gus, please . . .”

“You forgot to keep a date the other day. I want my green, Tru.”

“Not today, Gus, of all days! Please . . .”

“My green!”

“I haven’t got that kind of money right now!”

“Get it!”

“Give me a few days, Gus. Let me get things settled here.”

“The way I hear it there may not be a few days. That’s why I’m so eager.”

“Wh-at?”

“I hear things out of the cop shops, boy. I think you bought

yourself a large package of trouble this time. So you come up with the green, huh? And pronto. Like, by noon!"

"Gus, what have you heard?"

"Noon, boy. I'll send Oppie and Shutter by to make the collection."

There was a click in Truman's ear. Gus was gone. He stared at the receiver. His heart beat hard. Gus had said he was in trouble. Gus had said "*this time*." Truman went to the window, stared out at the bright day without seeing it. He was thoroughly frightened.

Sheriff Jackson and a man named Karl Rupert, a man who had been a member of Alexander Beach's squad of attorneys for years, arrived at the mansion within the hour. Both were somber. Truman detected an undercurrent of animosity in their movements and directness. It was as if they were tolerating, by necessity, a condemned man.

The sheriff said, "Mr. Rupert came to me this morning, lad, with something that will interest you. Read it, please, Mr. Rupert."

The attorney took an envelope from his inside coat pocket and extracted a single sheet of paper. He read:

*Omar, the eldest, perished in fire
And immediately among us there
was a liar*

Elmo, second-born, hanged by

rope

*Oh, that I could be sure with
whom to cope*

Murder, murder twice

*All because of the roll of the
dice?*

Policemen, hear

The slayer is near

A car, a dive

Who remains alive?

A rope, a tree

Will the next be me?

Truman

He's not human

So . . . I bequeath with clarity

All material riches to charity.

The attorney closed the sheet of paper. "Dated the first day of October, this year, and signed by Alexander Beach, a lover of poetry. This instrument was brought to me in a sealed envelope by Alexander Beach on the second day of October. Mr. Beach did not reveal the content. His instructions were explicit and simple. The envelope was not to be opened except in the event of his death by any cause other than natural."

"Well?" Sheriff Jackson demanded.

Truman stuttered, "I . . . I don't—understand."

The sheriff said, "Autopsies were performed on your wife and your father. Fresh water—kitchen tap water—was found in the lungs of both. We know by the chemicals in

the water. Neither died in the ocean. Did you kill your brothers, too, Truman? Your father seemed to suspect that you did."

"I haven't killed anyone! Father was senile! He failed mentally in the last year! He imagined things! He—"

"Mr. Rupert?" Jackson interrupted.

The attorney said, "Only last week Alexander Beach completed a transaction which involves the sale of all of his holdings. The sale is to be announced tomorrow. But the point is, Alexander devised and worked out the details of this transaction in his own mind, put them on paper and brought the proposal to us, his attorneys. We were unable to find a single shortcoming. It seemed a perfect liquidation to us, complicated but perfect. I say that a man who devised such a liquidation was not senile."

"I didn't kill him!" Truman repeated. "I haven't killed anyone!"

"I think you bobbed more than apples at your party last night, son," Jackson said stonily.

Truman shot to his feet. "You can't prove that!"

"I can try."

Truman leaped. He smashed a fist against Karl Rupert's face, sending the attorney reeling, and he squared to meet Sheriff Jackson who was coming up out of the

chair. They crashed to the floor. The sheriff clawed for a holstered gun. Truman clamped Jackson's wrist, attempted to wrench the gun from him. The gun exploded. Truman felt the sheriff lift under him, then collapse with a groan.

Truman bounded to his feet, holding Jackson's gun. Jackson writhed on the rug, blood seeping from his thigh. Truman bolted across the room, slammed the muzzle of the gun against Karl Rupert's head, then raced out of the mansion. Too late he realized he did not have car keys in his pocket. He turned down the driveway. The gun slipped from his fingers as he ran. He started after it, then turned his course toward the highway. Out there somewhere, if he could run fast enough, was freedom.

The sedan turning into the mansion grounds brought a shout from Truman and sent him careening from the drive. The sedan rocked to a stop, and Oppie and Shutter bailed out. Truman ran, but the two hoods were swift. They smashed him to the ground, piled on him.

"What the hell is this?" Oppie breathed harshly.

Shutter fastened fingers in Truman's hair and yanked his head back. "What's going on, Tru-baby? Why the hurry? How come . . ."

Shutter used his free hand to go over Truman's body. "Where's Gustav's green, man? It's high noon."

Truman gurgled. He could not speak.

Oppie took out a flick knife and put the point of the blade against Truman's exposed throat.

"Twenty thou, Tru-baby," he said softly. "Let him talk, Shutter."

Truman, freed, moaned as the point of the flick knife pricked his throat. He clawed his thighs helplessly in pure terror.

"Twenty thou," Oppie repeated.

All Truman could do was shake his head.

"You ain't got it?"

Truman made a feeble effort to escape. From behind, Shutter caught his jaws in both hands and yanked him back. Oppie put the

knife point against his heart. Truman froze.

"An accident, Shutter?" Oppie purred. "Like a brother?"

"Or maybe a suicide. Like another brother," Shutter suggested.

"How 'bout if he drowns?"

Both men laughed, and Oppie slowly pushed the blade of the flick knife into Truman's heart.

They dropped the body on the grass.

"Every so often," Oppie said philosophically as he cleaned the knife blade, "there's gotta be a lesson for others."

They turned for a last swift look up at the house, and it was then they noticed the official car. A man with a bloody leg was steadying himself against it, and sighting at them down the barrel of a riot gun as if daring them to test its range.

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